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The Harrison Version:

'So long ago that it's become a song?'

Oliver Taplin

Music was vital and central to Aeschylus' own production of *Agamemnon* in 458 BC.[1] I am using 'music' here as a shorthand for a complex, dynamic, and volatile interaction of melody, metric, pace, rhythm, and tone. This indisputable element will have been especially prominent for the various lyric parts of the play, with their complex metres and instrumental accompaniment. But the iambics also had some musicality in this broad sense, even though they were spoken unaccompanied in a relatively simple line-after-line (stichic) metre. They were still far more dynamic than prose—and even further from what Pasolini dubbed 'teatro della Chiacchiera' (theatre of chit-chat).[2]

Few modern performances make any organic attempt to reflect this Aeschylean music. Peter Stein's production, great though it was, had virtually no place for music of any kind. Ariane Mnouchkine's was accompanied continuously by the multi-instrumental virtuosity of Jean-Jacques Lemêtre, but the words of the plays were not integrated or matched with this in any significant way (at least not memorably so); nor were the choral and other lyric passages differentiated in delivery. This chapter will discuss a notable exception: Peter Hall's production of Tony Harrison's translation in 1981–2. If I had to pick out one leading strength of that *Oresteia*, it would be momentum, pace, dynamic, rhythm—a constant sense of dramatic urgency and forward movement. It is a production that has been much admired, and almost as strongly disliked and derogated. The weighing of the pros and cons will also serve, I hope, as a springboard to considering the general importance of dynamic, of metre, and of music in the modern translation and performance of Greek tragedy.

There may be a variety of reasons for this absence of poetically integrated music from modern performances. One is our ignorance (not as total as often claimed)

[1] I gave an embryonic version of this chapter at a conference on 'Tony Harrison and the Classics', held at the Bristol Institute of Hellenic and Roman Studies on 29 September 2001. I am most grateful to those responsible at Bristol for the stimulus and for challenging discussion.

[2] For this vividly contemptuous phrase, see Fusillo, Ch. 12, p. 227.

of the actual sounds of ancient Greek music;[3] another is their very different and alien metrics and phonetics, which were based on pitch and syllable-length rather than on the stress which dominates most modern patterning. Another is the appropriation of dramatic music by what is generally now regarded as a separate art-form (despite its originally direct relation to ancient Greek tragedy): opera. But, more than anything else probably, this lack of music is inextricable from the diction and metrics of the translations used. Very few have any realizable musicality built into them. Not many of them attempt any metrical version of the spoken iambics, let alone begin to echo or recapture the metrical and musical virtuosity of the lyric passages. Paradoxically, the lyric passages are more usually translated into prose than the spoken iambics, though even these seldom depart from a school-book blank verse. Most translators would probably reply, if challenged, that the achievement of a complex metric—or even of a simple one—is too high a price to pay, that it requires too much distortion of the text, or too distant a departure from the original, to be justified.

Many academic scholars or theorists of translation, as well as practitioners, would go along with them, and with André Lefevere, who argued that any attempt at metrical translation ends up paying too high a price in the alteration to diction and syntax that is inevitable. This stands in stark contrast with the poet Joseph Brodsky's insistence (in 1974) that 'metres in verse are kinds of spiritual magnitudes for which nothing can be substituted . . . A translator should begin his work with a search for at least a metrical equivalent of the original form'.[4] The Harrison Version clearly sides with Brodsky.

It might be clearest to weigh straight in with a practical illustration; and rather than taking just one passage, I shall consider the whole phenomenon of stichomythia. This device of single-line dialogue interchange was a basic constructive feature of Greek tragedy right from the early days. True, later Sophocles tends to avoid regular stretches, but later Euripides on the contrary goes in for ever more relentlessly long and regular passages. In Aeschylus stichomythia usually involves the chorus as one of the two participants, reflecting the place of the chorus within the power balances of earlier tragedy. But in the *Oresteia* the central two-party confrontations of the first two plays take the form of stichomythia: Agamemnon and Clytemnestra in the purple-cloth scene, and Orestes and Clytemnestra, once the cards are on the table, in *Libation Bearers*.

Why should the tragedians have been so devoted to this dialogue-form? Part of the point of stichomythia must have been that it has such a very different dynamic from the central spoken mode, the rhesis or set-piece speech. No less essentially, the 1/1/1/1 pattern makes for a sense of tension, a period of ding-dong capping, of attacking, parrying, and manoeuvring. Stichomythia moves fast, and it fits a lot

[3] We are greatly helped towards seeing what there is to be heard by Pöhlmann and West (2001).

[4] I owe both these citations—with gratitude—to Peter France's introduction to 'Translation studies and translation criticism' (p. 5), which itself forms the first section of the generally excellent introduction to 'Theoretical Issues' in France (2000).

of argumentative movement into a tight space. Some of the best observations on it are to be found in John Gould's articles: for example, 'the very ceremoniousness of the exchange serves to create tension and precariousness of mood.'[5]

Stichomythia is usually one of the translators' least favourite challenges. Such a radically non-naturalistic type of dialogue has proved a headache to most, who have been naturalizing 'domesticators' (I shall return to this term). If they are to stick to the technique, they find that they are constantly compressing one line to keep it in bounds, and then fattening out another to make it stretch to fit the space. Many simply abandon the regularity altogether, encouraged no doubt by the dialogue techniques of modern drama, whether naturalistic or artificial, which draw away from the tight, tense, and agonistically balanced forms of Greek drama.

It is an almost emblematic feature of Harrison's *Oresteia* that stichomythia, far from being an embarrassment, becomes a strength. His key is (of course) rhyme: it is rhyme that for him achieves in English that dynamic of tense regularity, 'a metrical equivalent of the original form'. In keeping with this, in the original 1981 production all the stichomythias were conducted to a strict metronomic pulse, the tempo differing depending on the ambient atmosphere. The form was also given an explicit musical emphasis through Harrison Birtwistle's scoring:[6] a regular three-note cadence sounded at the beginning and end of each stichomythia, marking a framing pause on either side of it. And it is worth noting that in the printed versions of the translation the couplets are numbered, and that this is reinforced by the archaic typographical device of side-lining the rhyming couplets, a reminder of their dynamic.[7]

I shall now quote the very last scene of *Agamemnon* (lines 1665–73) in a recent 'close' translation and in the Harrison. These lines take the form of a stichomythia (in trochaic tetrameters rather than the usual iambic trimeters) between the chorus and Aegisthus, interrupted by Clytemnestra and brought to a close by her final couplet. This will introduce some of the most conspicuous features of Harrison's metric and diction, and begin to raise the question of his engagement with the original Greek. So here is the passage in Christopher Collard's recent translation for Oxford Worlds Classics, which aims to be 'readable and accurate'.[8]

CHORUS: It would not be like Argives to fawn upon an evil man!
AEGISTHUS: But I shall still pursue you in later days!
CHORUS: No, not if fortune direct Orestes to come here.
AEGISTHUS: I'm well aware that men in exile feed on hopes.

[5] This is from his 1987 article on characterization, in Gould (2001), 78–111 at p. 99. For a survey of the form see B. Seidensticker in Jens (1971), 183–220.

[6] The score has never been published, but can fortunately still be heard on the video of the television film made for Channel 4 (available only from Films for the Humanities and Sciences, Princeton, NJ—not from Channel 4 itself).

[7] There are slight typographical differences between the various printings (1981, 1985 = 1986, 2002). The latest drops the numbering of the couplets in stichomythias, thus diluting the printed indicators of musicality. I shall cite from Harrison (1986), since I like that volume's title best.

[8] Collard (2002), lxiv.

CHORUS: Go on, then, do it, get yourself fat, polluting justice since you can!
AEGISTHUS: You shall pay me the penalty, be sure of it, in return for this foolishness!
CHORUS: Vaunt away while you have the confidence, like a cockerel near the hen!
CLYTEMNESTRA: Take no account of this empty yelping! In our twin mastery of this house
I and you will make things well.

And now the Harrison (though without the sideline bracketing of each couplet):

1. CH: Argives don't grovel to your evil sort.
AEG: Then Argives like you will have to be taught.

2. CH: Not if Orestes comes back to his own.
AEG: Exiles eat hope, all gristle and bone.

3. CH: Grow fat on injustice. Shit on the state!
AEG: I'm warning you, old fool, before it's too late . . .

4. CH: Cock-a-doodle-doo, the dungheap lord,
crow a bit louder, your hen will applaud!

CLYTEMNESTRA: Let the terriers yap, all bark and no bite!
You and I, we'll rule this house, and set it right.

This immediately demonstrates what a high premium this version puts on dynamic, metric, and rhythm. While the lines are distinctly terser than the original (and the Collard), I do not find that this is seriously at the expense of the verbal sense—in fact the literal sense is never far distant, and there is a constant sensitivity to verbal nuance. But the driving force lies with metre and with music. The tight wording also serves to bring out some argumentative tensions that tend to be lost in 'closer' versions: notice here the triangular antitheses, present in the original text, between the chorus' emphasis on the city set against Aegisthus' personal ambition, which is in turn set against Clytemnestra's emphasis on 'this house'. The agonistic repartee between 'exiles eat hope' and 'grow fat on injustice' is nicely brought out; and so are the farmyard images spelt out in 'the dung-heap lord' and 'let the terriers yap'. But what about 'shit on the state' ('polluting justice')? Is this not merely the kind of vulgarizing liberty that one might expect from the poet of *u*? Yet *μιαίνων τὴν δίκην* immediately after *πιαίνου* in 1669, alongside the cock in the next insult, arguably bring the dung-heap pretty close to the surface of the original Greek. The 4-letter word undoubtedly helps to keep the tension of the stichomythic struggle 'precarious'. The distance from the original in some respects brings it closer in others, particularly in musicality.

The wasps' nest that I have stirred here is a fundamental paradox that has always haunted literary translation, practice and theory—and always will: to stay close to the original you have to depart from it; and if you stick close to the original, you will be untrue to it. Every translator, whether consciously or unconsciously, makes fundamental decisions of priority along the axis of this paradox. When William Cowper set about translating Homer, he claimed fidelity ('I have omitted nothing;

I have invented nothing'): yet at the same time, he insisted: 'If we copy Homer too closely . . . instead of translating, we murder him.'[9] This recognition that to stick too closely is to 'murder' your beloved poet has not, generally speaking, filtered through to our times, and especially not to professional classicists. Classicists like their translations to be describable as, for example, close, accurate, plain, consistent. These epithets would fit all four of the current major series of translations: Loeb, Penguin, Worlds Classics, and Everyman. Many of the surviving tragedies have, in fact, been retranslated for these series recently; and it is very telling that all four translate into prose.[10] All have been too cautious to risk or to defy the accusations and denigrations that literary or poetic versions almost invariably attract from classicists: distortion, taking liberties, self-indulgence, and so forth. Poetic effusions may be tolerated, or even admired, if they are the creations of fringe-figure geniuses, like Ezra Pound, or of poets who know no Greek, such as Christopher Logue; but those who know the languages well are expected to play safe.[11]

A leading reason for this preferred taste of classicists for accurate, careful translation is not hard to find. In order to become professionals, they (we) will have to have translated both prepared and unprepared texts, and to have shown due knowledge of them in examinations. These official translations have to be close enough to demonstrate that the candidate fully understands the precise wording and syntax of the original. This formal exercise inevitably imposes a restraint on any sense of larger poetic qualities through its insistence on displaying knowledge of the construal of the detailed verbal sense of the original text. But, while it has been business as usual in the 'set book' and 'unseens' classes of Classics Departments, a whole new domain or mystery, which knows itself as 'Translation Studies', has mushroomed in the last 25 years. Some of the notions that have become common currency in Translation Studies have clear applicability to the wasps' nest that I am prodding. There is, for example, a central and particularly useful pair of terms promoted by Lawrence Venuti: 'foreignization' and 'domestication'.[12] Domestication is, of course, the normal practice with the translation of Greek and Latin classics. But it might be claimed that domestication means 'murder', or at least drugging into a compliant and trouble-free half-life. Even to put it in more friendly language, it means taming and homogenizing.

But once the matter is put in terms of this polarity, it is immediately obvious that this kind of 'domestication' or 'making at home'—sometimes fudged with

[9] Cf. F. Rosslyn in France (2000), 353–4.

[10] The same is largely true of the various versions recently published by Methuen, Pennsylvania and Cambridge.

[11] This disjunction is openly recognized in the OUP New York series 'The Greek Tragedy in New Translations', initiated a long time ago by William Arrowsmith (one of the few classical scholars to have produced powerful translations himself). These are by poets who work with the advice and moderation of a professional scholar. It is interesting that they have rarely travelled to this side of the Atlantic. When the series reaches completion, before long, it may well have some renewed impact.

[12] See esp. Venuti (1995).

vacuous phrases like 'what Aeschylus would have said if he were writing today'—runs directly counter to one of the main currents in classical scholarship of the last twenty-five years. The move has generally been away from appropriation and towards anthropologizing, contextualizing, historicizing. This is the equivalent of what in the translation context Venuti calls 'foreignizing'. Meanwhile, assimilation, identification, and naturalism have all been very much not the name of the current game; 'domestication' is regarded as an attitude of the past, quite often labelled with that most abusive of epithets, 'Victorian'.

Harrison's *Oresteia* is very clearly an example of foreignization. Anthony Pym cites it as a notable exception to the general trend in the later twentieth century towards 'privileging exact plainness over adventurous literariness'.[13] Responses to it make an interesting test-case of what is at issue. Generally speaking, both the production and the translation were positively appreciated back in 1981–2, and they undoubtedly made a significant impact at the time. But people either loved it or hated it. There certainly were those who responded negatively; including many of the press critics. I also have the impression that a proportion of classicists and classicist-theatrologists were among the detractors of the production or the translation or both. Back in 1984, Michael Walton wrote, 'The translation . . . represents a considerable feat of imaginative composition, but in production, sound dominated sight . . . must be chalked up as an opportunity missed.'[14] More recently, David Wiles regards the Hall/Harrison *Oresteia* as a negative and in some ways perverted instance of 'ritual theatre'.[15] The fullest academic account is by R. B. Parker,[16] who is, generally speaking, admiring of most aspects. Nonetheless he has some pretty negative things to say about the translation: 'Its insistent alliteration proved ultimately exhausting . . . Its meaning was sometimes obscure and its decorum unreliable' (I shall come back to this last phrase later). No less damning than any of these is Michael Silk's extravagant praise of the Ted Hughes's version which was backed up with a negative comparison with the 'quaint and numbing (if sometimes brilliant) Anglo-Saxonism of Tony Harrison'.[17]

Without entering into dispute about the merits or defects of the Ted Hughes, what is this about 'quaint . . . Anglo-Saxonism'? I suspect that Silk may have been influenced by his student Simeon Underwood, who published an interesting article, which is unusually well informed by contemporary Translation Studies, about Harrison and Logue.[18] Underwood makes some positive points and shrewd observations about the Harrison Version, but he eventually comes through on his last page as pretty seriously negative in his final assessment. 'This synthetic style claims familiarity through its use of colloquialism and its strong rhythm; but it is

[13] Pym in France (2000), 77.
[14] Walton (1984), 172; further criticisms in Patsalidis and Sakellaridou (1999), 325–39.
[15] Wiles (2000), 45–7. [16] R. B. Parker (1986).
[17] In the *Times Literary Supplement* for 17 December 1999, 16–17. I have made some observations on the Hughes in Wiseman (2002), 3–6.
[18] Underwood (1998).

in itself confrontational, with its vocabulary of "otherness". . . . What is left is an abrasive inverted snobbery . . . there is continual friction . . . '.[19] The irony is that Harrison would himself probably welcome much of this—in fact, 'abrasion' is a word that he has himself cited as something which he strives for. The otherness and the confrontation are precisely the characteristics which the foreignizing and anthropologically aware type of translation strives for. In other words, Underwood condemns in terms that others might well regard as praise.

But my main problem with Underwood's critique is the supposition, taken for granted and never demonstrated, that what the Harrison translation (and indeed the Peter Hall production as a whole) strove for was some kind of 'primitiveness'. I quote his last page again: 'Harrison's reading of Aeschylus does seem fundamentally mistaken: the poetic primitivism for which Harrison forges a hybrid equivalent is based on historical stereotyping, and does little justice to Aeschylus' sophistication of dramatic technique, language and thought.' I find this sentence way off the mark.[20] This whole attack seems to be based on one feature only, namely the echoes in Harrison's *Oresteia* of Anglo-Saxon poetry. For Underwood and for Silk, this Anglo-Saxon colouring seems to be *the* dominant characteristic. But how essential or conspicuous is it? How many of Harrison's readers, let alone of theatre audiences, were (or are) conversant enough with the metrics and sound effects of Anglo-Saxon poetry for this to be a significant, let alone a dominant, colouring? I suspect that the answer is even fewer than the proportion who know or recognize ancient Greek colouring. This is not to deny that it is there, but to deny that it makes for a predominant primitivism.

Harrison has, in fact, recently written about this himself.[21] He displays that he is much more erudite about the *Corpus Poeticum Boreale* than most of us—or of his audience—are. The first point to note in his own account is that he compares the presence of Anglo-Saxon in his *Oresteia* to the presence of Homer in Aeschylus. In other words, it is a sophisticated intertext, not a primitivizing reversion. Second, he singles out consonantal alliteration—what he calls 'consonantal crag splinters'—as something particularly congenial to his own poetic language, especially to its Yorkshire roots. Third, he finds in Anglo-Saxon kennings a way into handling Aeschylus' famous compound words—or at least a way of transplanting that poetic feature into English.

These compound words, especially nouns, most certainly are a central feature of Harrison's *Oresteia*, but with a few exceptions, there is nothing particularly redolent of Anglo-Saxon about them. They are used freely, without any precise correspondence to the placing of such word-formations in the original Aeschylus; and they have a huge range of functions and levels. At one extreme of the sliding scale there are the unique formations (more often than not *hapax legomena* in

[19] Ibid. 97.

[20] I bridle particularly at the claim that it does little justice to Aeschylus' 'sophistication of dramatic technique', because my own *Stagecraft of Aeschylus* is implicated in this accusation!

[21] T. Harrison (2002), 3–36; also printed in *Arion* 11.3 (2002), 81–113.

English) which are generally of the kind that is closest to the Aeschylean lexicon: words like 'galesqualls', 'bloodstorm', 'lootlust', 'whore-war', 'oar-spoor', 'child-stew', 'grieftrills', 'woecups', 'flesh-chef', 'lootpearl', 'looseflow', 'shrewgrudge'. At the other extreme, there are recurrent formations, words which become part of the basic vocabulary of the plays, and integral to their whole thematic texture. These would include, for example, 'he-child' and 'she-child', 'he-god' and 'she-god', 'bed-bond', 'blood-bond', 'man-lord', 'blood-grudge'. Another leading motive—or at any rate another leading effect—of these word-coinages is to avoid areas of English language which bring with them over-familiar 'domesticated' baggage, associations which are not necessarily appropriate, if not downright inappropriate. They are, in other words, part of Harrison's anthropological foreignizing. Thus, 'he-child' and 'she-child' avoid 'son' and 'daughter'; 'clan-chief' avoids 'general' or 'king' or 'prime minister'—all with notions of hierarchy or of national unity that should be avoided.[22]

Just as importantly, the Harrisonian word-building is used to avoid the familiar language of religion, especially of Christianity. Thus, for example, 'god-stone' avoids the word 'altar';[23] 'god-sop' avoids 'sacrifice'; and 'he-god' and 'she-god' not only gender the gods but also de-Christianize them. This contrasts with most other translators, including Ted Hughes, who not only usually uses the singular 'God', always with a capital 'G', but even repeatedly calls Apollo 'Son of God'. Harrison's avoidance of transcendental religiosity is one of the leading interpretative priorities of his version—and one of the reasons why the application of the term 'ritual' to his translation seems so odd. This is at its clearest and most controversial in the total omission (often criticized) of the so-called 'Hymn to Zeus' at *Agamemnon* 160–83.[24] The Harrison version challenges us to ask to what extent our obsession with the religion, especially the 'theodicy', of Aeschylean tragedy is an imposition driven by the search for religion-substitutes in the aftermath of the decline in the power of Christianity in our era.

You can take a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink. I can't make anyone *like* the Harrison version, but I can try to show that its chief characteristics are thought through, and that they engage with Aeschylean theatre and Aeschylean Greek. Some of the things that are most characteristic of Harrison, and which are exemplified in his *Oresteia*, are the very things that some people don't like in his

[22] I have to confess, though, that the heavy use of the word 'clan' and its compounds is not my favourite device in the language of Harrison's *Oresteia*.

[23] This particular example provoked a keen dispute at Bristol, where it was protested by some 'Bristol receptionists' that 'altar' has now irreversibly become the word for such sacred stones, used by classicists and anthropologists no less than Christian activists; they protested that 'god-stone' is overintrusively alienating. So this provides a nice test-case for the ever-present dilemma between domestication and foreignization.

[24] I was interested to learn from Amanda Wrigley that the Third Programme broadcast of Louis MacNeice's translation in July 1950, produced by Raymond Raikes, also omitted the so-called Hymn to Zeus. See Wrigley (forthcoming). This, like Harrison, presumably found that celebrated passage too liable to be assimilated to Christian redemptiveness.

poetry as a whole. Take for example, the 'unreliable decorum' that Parker complained of (see above, p. 240). This is undeniable and ubiquitous—and very Harrisonian. It comes from his lifelong mission to tear down the barriers that have been erected between high art and low art; it also tunes with his strong sense of humour, and of anti-authoritarianism. And his *Oresteia*, like all his work, aspires to be accessible. His seasonings of colloquialism and even of rude language stand as a kind of token of that. Words like 'gob', 'crapping', 'chops', 'gang', and 'bash' float to the surface of the text—all the way from the prologue with its 'come on, blasted beacon', to 'feminine flame-a-phores', to 'Shaggermemnon'. The humour and 'unreliable decorum' can also be more gently worked in. Two particularly nice examples are at the expense of the chorus of old men in *Agamemnon*. Just after Clytemnestra has finished her virtuoso beacon speech, they say,

> But your tale's such a marvel we would like it repeated.
> We'd like all the details. You said first that Hephaistos . . .

before she interrupts. And at a moment of great pathos in her final stichomythia Cassandra says,

> There's no escape now. No more delay.

to which the chorus respond,

> 'While there's life there's . . .' you know what they say.

Is this lack of decorum so unAeschylean? The extent to which tragedy did or did not invite laughter from its audience is still a hotly debated topic. But whatever one might think about that issue, it is clear that there are places when Aeschylus turns to ruder language, the language of invective and even of obscenity. Apollo's attacks on the Furies in *Eumenides* 179 ff. are an extreme example; then there is the nurse with her nappies and baby crap in *Libation Bearers*. Clytemnestra's sneering at Agamemnon's infidelity at *Agamemnon* 1438 ff. is particularly sharp: that is the context, in fact, of Harrison's 'Shaggermemnon' and of the description of Cassandra as 'his bash back on shipboard' for *ναυτίλων δὲ σελμάτων ἰσοτριβής* (or whatever that last word should be).

It is an interesting question whether one could tell on purely internal grounds whether any particular translation was made from the original language or from an intermediary version or versions (or some combination of the two). It must, in fact, be easier to prove dependence on another translation,[25] than to prove the direct consultation of the original text. In Tony Harrison's case, there is, in any case, masses of external evidence. His copy of Gilbert Murray's Oxford Classical Text edition with its neat colour-coded underlinings and annotations bears ample witness to many a long hour spent labouring with the Lexicon and with the commentaries (see Fig. 13.1). There is also his huge collection of working

[25] As I did with Ted Hughes and Philip Vellacott's Penguin in Wiseman (2002), 3.

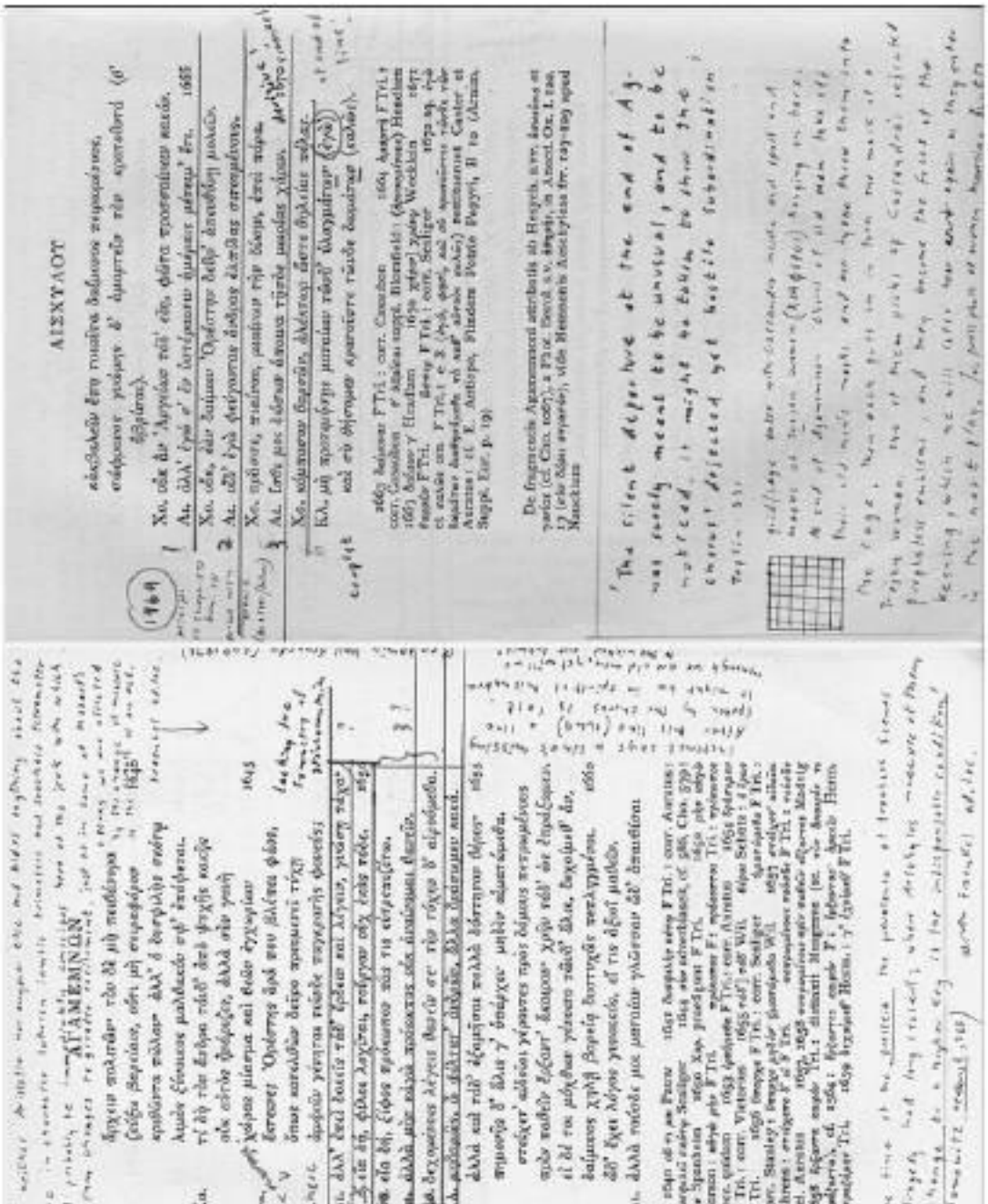


Figure 13.1. The ending of *Agamemnon* from Tony Harrison's copy of the Oxford Classical Texts.

notebooks, which leave a kind of paperchase of his wrestlings with the original, with all sorts of secondary literature, and with his preoccupations in politics, current events, and in theatre.

Many features of his version can be claimed to be, in one way or another, inspired by the original Greek—no less so than with the translation by the professional scholar, Louis MacNeice. But the Harrison Version is, in fact, more akin to the Browning Version (published 1877). It was Robert Browning's aspiration to produce what he called 'a transcription'.[26] The result is so strange in places that, as W. B. Stanford said, 'It's a good thing that the Aeschylus is there to explain what the Browning is meant to mean!' The double-sided irony is that what Browning aimed to do was to make the Aeschylus totally present—in a sense, he favoured absolute domestication: whereas what he now seems to us to have done is to have totally foreignized the Aeschylus. In the cases of both Browning and Harrison, it is a direct engagement with the language and the cultural context of the original that has led to the foreignizing.

This brings me to the point when I can challenge the notion, which is quite widespread among those interested in translation from Greek or Latin, that knowledge of the original language is somehow bound to lead to respectable domestication. Hand-in-hand with this is the supposition that tame translation is the province of scholars, while literary daring and inventiveness is the province of artists or amateurs who are not hampered by a knowledge of the original. There is a provocative footnote relating to this by Simeon Underwood.[27] He cites André Lefevere's assumption (with reference, in fact, to modern languages) that the translator needs to know the original text and the background culture: 'Lefevere is surely wrong in this regard. Logue's Homer is not invalidated by his lack of knowledge of the source language. An evaluative framework which would exclude Logue on these grounds seems to me to be scholarly protectionism. Logue might go further by arguing that the validity of his project is *increased* by his lack of knowledge of the source language.' I do not want to get bogged down with the terms 'validity' and 'invalidate', and I would not want to 'exclude' a translator who does not directly know the source language. What I would strongly take issue with is the notion that there is some kind of *virtue* in not knowing the original language; that those who are trammelled in this way are somehow doomed to dogged domestication. Harrison is my prize counter-example. The highly-crafted conscientiousness of Louis MacNeice might be regarded as an example that tips the other way, though he certainly would not exemplify Logue's (tongue-in-cheek?) suggestion that the more a translator knows the original Greek, the worse the translation is bound to be.[28] The fundamental point for me is that a knowledge of the original language and a knowledge of the cultural context *make a*

[26] See Adrian Poole in France (2000), 358 and Macintosh, Ch. 8, p. 154; Prins, ch. 9, p. 166. For Harrison's own debt to Browning, see T. Harrison (2002), 8–13.

[27] Underwood (1998), 92 with footnote 54, taking issue with Lefevere (1975), 101–2.

[28] Logue (1981), 7.

difference. This is not a matter of scholarly protectionism, although it is an observation on the bearing of scholarship on translation in the longer run. Whether that knowledge of language and culture leads towards a tame homogenization or towards a liberation of fresh perspectives, and even of fresh provocations, is not something intrinsic to the knowledge (or ignorance), but to the translator's particular priorities and abilities.

In the case of Harrison, the fact that his knowledge of Greek and of the Aeschylean world led him to unorthodox and foreignizing inventiveness, rather than to conscientious accuracy, is all part and parcel of his profoundly ambivalent relationship with the place of Classics within British education and British class structures. And this is in its turn rooted in his own experience of a classical education. That education was vital to his discovery of his own poetic talent, but it also came to exemplify for him the cultural barriers and the class system which he has dedicated himself to defying and breaking down. The great thing about his *Oresteia* is that his chief ally in wresting the plays out of the grip of exclusivity and orthodoxy has been Aeschylus himself. Aeschylus supplied him with poetry and drama of such invention and such unpredictable power that they have fuelled his own poetry and dramatic technique. They have provided the momentum to take the version into orbit, free of the gravitational pull of deadening respectability. It is this that makes his translation both faithful and foreign.

Right back in 1975 Harrison had written to Peter Hall, 'I am always ready to jettison the poetic ballast to keep the balloon aloft.'[29] And among the several ways that this is achieved, I would single out the lyric element as the greatest. The last part of this chapter will be devoted to this. This again is highly Aeschylean—and there is of course a much greater proportion of lyric in the *Oresteia* than in Sophocles or Euripides. Most Victorian or Edwardian translators had used strict rhyming metres for these lyrics, most notoriously Gilbert Murray; but the reaction against that, endorsed by Louis MacNeice himself, had meant the almost total abandonment of any such metric throughout the mid-twentieth century.

The first point to note about Harrison's reinstatement of rhyming lyric is that there is significantly less in his *Agamemnon* than in the other two plays. A very rough calculation indicates that over 20 per cent of the text of the translation of *Eumenides* is in rhyming stanzas or couplets (I am not counting in stichomythias, of course), 35 per cent of *Libation Bearers*, but under 15 per cent of *Agamemnon*. This has, I suspect, a direct bearing on the sense which I myself had, back at the time of the original performances, that the trilogy, instead of losing power as it went on, became stronger and stronger. Perhaps *Libation Bearers* was even better than *Eumenides*, but there was no sense of anticlimax. This is the opposite of the

[29] Tony Harrison kindly allowed me to make selections from this correspondence for publication in *Omnibus* in 1982, reprinted in Astley (1991), 275–80. I did not, however, include this telling sentence.

usual *Oresteia*-experience, where *Agamemnon* tends to be so much more effective than the other two plays that it is downhill all the way once Aegisthus has arrived.

Relatively little of *Agamemnon* is translated, then, into lyric metres in English; and there are in fact some lost opportunities, for example the first section of the Cassandra scene. Also, as well as the omission of the Hymn to Zeus (see above, p. 242) three of the four stanzas of the lyric after Agamemnon's exit (viz lines 988–1034) are omitted from the text—it is hard to see why, as I should have thought that they were good Harrison material. In the video performance, there are also substantial cuts from the published translation in the so-called 'first stasimon' (355–487), and another cut, though smaller, from the lyric confrontation between the chorus and Clytemnestra after the murder. Nonetheless, there are still some marvellous lyrics. I am going to select for closer examination a passage from early in the play, in fact the first rhyming stanzas of the trilogy, which I remember as electrifyingly powerful in the original production. It also gives me an opportunity to make a more general point about choral lyric in performance.

There is a long anapaestic passage when the chorus first enters in the *Agamemnon*, all the way from line 40 to line 103, before the metre eventually turns to dactylic strophic lyric and the narrative of what happened at Aulis. I am going to concentrate on lines 114–21, the second half of the first lyric strophe. The first half of the strophe (7 lines, 37 words in the Greek) introduces how the old men can recall the departure of the expedition against Troy from ten years before, and how there was an omen. Harrison covers this in only two lines:

> Gab's the last god-gift of the flabby and feeble—
> singing the omens that mobilised Argos:

The second half (7 lines, 34 words) describes the omen. Here it is first in the 'accurate' version of Collard:

> the king of birds for the king of ships,
> one black bird and one bird white behind,
> appearing hard by their headquarters
> on the spear-hand side, perching where they were seen
> clearly all round as they fed
> on a creature big with young heavy in its womb, a hare
> stopped from its final run.
> Cry 'Sorrow, sorrow!', but let the good prevail!

The lyric in the Harrison waits for this moment so that it can embark straight away on the narrative of the omen:

> Two preybirds came as prophecy
> blackwing and silverhue
> came for our twin kings to see
> out of the blue the blue

The right side was the side they flew
spear side luck side War
one blackwing one silverhue
and everybody saw

and everybody saw them tear
with talon and with claw
the belly of a pregnant hare
and everybody saw

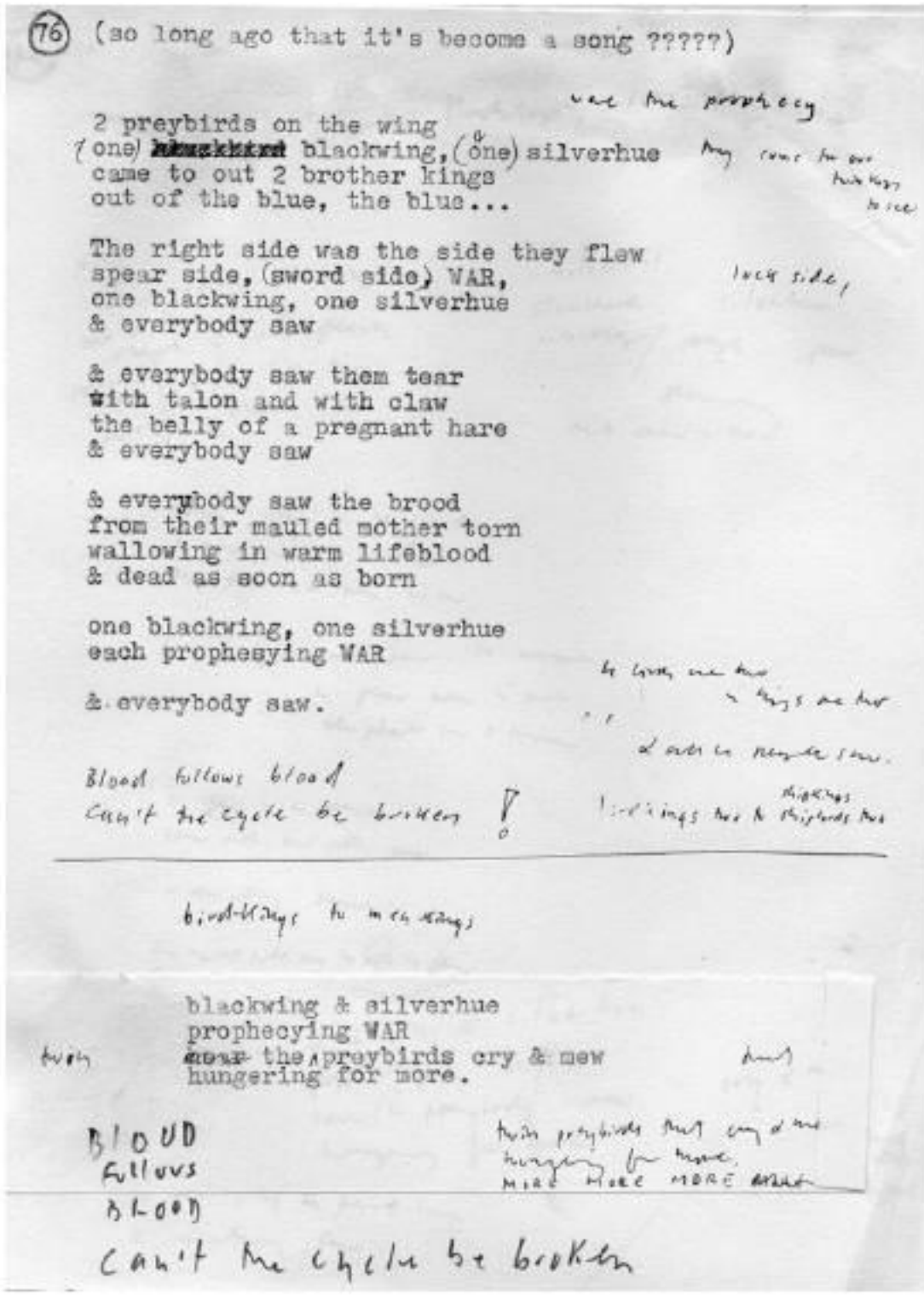
and everybody saw the brood
from their mauled mother torn
wallowing in warm lifeblood
and dead as soon as born

blackwing and silverhue
prophesying War
the twin preybirds that cry and mew
hungering for more . . .

Batter, batter the doom-drum, but believe there'll be better!

In terms of a word-for-word translation, this is appreciably further from the original than most of the Harrison Version: five stanzas to cover what is only seven lines of Greek—and something like triple the number of words. But it is not hard to see what is driving it: the kind of priority that Joseph Brodsky advocated, which is to say that the rhythmical and ceremonial sense come first. The stanzas have an incantatory, almost mesmeric, quality, enhanced by the repetitions, particularly 'and everybody saw' (four times). This brings out for a modern audience something which is inherent in the original rather than explicit: that the chorus is embarking on a narrative of huge potential consequence, a narrative which is, however, one of symbol and metaphor rather than directly explained or spelled out in moralizing.

Anyone who has seen and heard the video would agree, I think, that this sense of hidden consequence, of power beyond the direct narrative, is immeasurably enhanced by being set to choral song. All the lyrics of the original production had some kind of musical accompaniment (scored by Harrison Birtwistle, of course), but so too did much of the dialogue. But only a small proportion of the lyrics were set to song, and an even smaller proportion set for singing in unison as this one was. Personally, I feel that this was a pity, and that this passage shows what a huge potential the choral performance-mode has. Why was this passage made the first sung lyric of the trilogy? Partly, no doubt, simply because it is the first strophic choral lyric. But there is also an annotation in an early draft, which I found when Tony Harrison generously and patiently let me riffle through his notebooks (see Fig. 13.2). He typed within brackets, with several question-marks, 'so long ago that it's become a song?' I suppose the idea of this is that this story of ten years ago is something that the old men have so often gone over, that it has



(76) (so long ago that it's become a song ?????)

2 preybirds on the wing
(one) blackwing, (one) silverhue
came to out 2 brother kings
out of the blue, the blue...

The right side was the side they flew
spear side, (sword side) WAR,
one blackwing, one silverhue
& everybody saw

& everybody saw them tear
with talon and with claw
the belly of a pregnant hare
& everybody saw

& everybody saw the brood
from their mauled mother torn
wallowing in warm lifeblood
& dead as soon as born

one blackwing, one silverhue
each prophesying WAR

& everybody saw.

Blood follows blood
Can't the cycle be broken

blackwing & silverhue
prophecying WAR
the preybirds cry & mew
hungering for more.

BLOOD
follows
BLOOD
Can't the cycle be broken

Figure 13.2. Page from Tony Harrison's *Agamemnon* notebooks.

become a kind of folksong. Whatever the reasoning, the effect in performance suggests to me that it would have been a good thing if only more, and even perhaps all, of the lyrics of Harrison's *Oresteia* had been set to choral music in this way.

Very few productions of Greek tragedy today, outside Greece itself, even attempt to explore the possibilities of song. The *Oresteia*s of Peter Stein and Ariane Mnouchkine, Silviu Purcarete, and Katie Mitchell included even less singing, solo or choral, than the 1981–2 National Theatre production. All sorts of explanations may have been at work, but in this case there is a direct declaration from the Director. In the first of his lectures *Exposed by the Mask*, Peter Hall pontificates on 'the Choruses of Greek tragedy': 'So how were they performed? Danced? Only surely as a secondary action to the words. Eloquent movement destroys eloquent words . . . Some say they were sung. I don't believe it. The sung text can never be a complex text.' And then on the next page, 'I believe that a single voice either spoke or sung or chanted every line that was complex. It could be then understood.'[30]

It would be indecorous to embark on a polemic against the presumption that what a director experiences in his own theatre and culture can—let alone should—be transferred to other times and cultures. It is a matter of fact not opinion that ancient Greek culture was permeated through and through with chorality: Choruses, sometimes as large as fifty, sang words that were sometimes simple, but often complex, on a huge variety of occasions from weddings to funerals to religious processions and festival competitions to victory celebrations to tragedy and comedy.[31] They learnt how to sing and how to listen to choral singing while they were children.

What is most strange is Peter Hall's failure to realize—or remember—how effective choral song was in his own production of the *Oresteia*. On that occasion he had a poet and a composer of sufficient quality and determination to overcome his own objections. He might claim that this particular stretch in the *parodos* is not complex—though that would surely be mistaken. But there were also two other chorally sung lyrics in the performance of *Agamemnon*: 'Geldshark Ares god of War' (437 ff.) and 'Hubris I breeds Hubris II' (763 ff.); and there was an effective unison chant just before the death-cries of Agamemnon. His own performance refutes him. It would be fascinating to hear Harrison's *Oresteia* with a choral singing of all the choral lyric passages: within them there lurks a powerful genie waiting to be released.

Finally, *αἴλινον αἴλινον εἰπέ, τὸ δ' εὖ νικάτω* an old ritual cry of lament, comes three times at the end the stanza (121, 138, 159), like a kind of refrain. Harrison's version of it is characteristically bold, alliterative, and unpredictable: '*Batter, batter the doom-drum, but believe there'll be better*!' By now it may be possible to see something of how this might have been arrived at; and that may be made clearer by working towards it from the usual translation. Somehow, a standard wording

[30] P. Hall (2000), 30–1.

[31] A good introduction to this subject is Bacon (1994–5).

has become attached to this line: 'Sorrow, cry sorrow. But may the good prevail.' These words, with slight variations, are to be found in almost all modern English versions (including Collard, see above 247). For a start, 'the good' has a more metaphysical or transcendental ring to it than *τὸ εὖ*, anathema to Harrison. And 'prevail' has an archaic tone suited more to priests and politicians than to accessible theatre. Also we hardly ever use the third-person imperative 'let the' or 'may the' in the live language: we use second- or first-person imperatives, such as 'hope' or 'let's hope'. Hence 'believe there'll be better' (the elision of parts of the verb 'to be' are standard Harrison). The clichéd 'sorrow' is pretty weak for *αἴλινον*, a call of lamentation with specific associations of death. Better than pretending that we have some form of equivalent, Harrison comes up with his 'doom-drum'; and since there has to be a shift from the first verb to 'believe' and to 'better', the more outlandish 'batter' frames the line.

'Metres in verse are kinds of spiritual magnitudes for which nothing can be substituted.' It might be argued that one of the fundamental ways in which tragedy gives some meaning to human suffering (or, if you insist, *seems* to give some meaning to suffering) is by turning it into poetry and music. Greek tragedy is musopoeic; and the music is not just decorative, but integral to its very *raison d'être*. If there is anything to this point of view—and I believe it has much truth to it—then music and dynamic should be at the top of the translator's agenda. It may be from long ago, but it should become a song.