

The bright ghosts of antiquity

by John Talbot

The gist of an old joke—it has a dozen local iterations—is that the Loeb Classical Library translations are so baffling that you have to consult the original Greek or Latin on the left-hand page to decipher the English translation on the right.

Funny or not, the wisecrack catches the condescension long directed at the Loeb, that venerable series of Greek and Latin classics in uniform volumes with facing English translations. Professors of classics in particular used to frown upon them. Until recently, merely to be seen on campus with a Loeb was to court scandal. There were gradations of disgrace. Those Loeb editions of Boethius, Bede, and Augustine I saw on the shelves of the professor who taught me Anglo-Saxon: those were permissible for an English scholar. But I, as a classics major, was to eschew the very same volumes. Even as an undergraduate, though I prized my Loeb edition of *The Republic*, edited and imaginatively annotated by Paul Shorey, I knew better than bring it to my seminar on Plato. That same tact—that same hypocrisy—accounts for the care I took, as a graduate student, to avoid detection as I sifted the used bookshops of Cambridge for second-hand Loeb. For many of us, the pleasure we took in the Loeb was tinged with guilt.

But attitudes are changing. Once treated as evidence of the decline of Western civilization, the Loeb Classical Library is now, in its centennial year, more often regarded as, if not quite a pillar of our culture, at least one

of its more enduring and useful props. The centenary invites consideration of how the Loeb has both reflected and, increasingly, shaped our literary culture.

First, to deal with that joke: Are the Loeb translations really so convoluted? They are not. What is true, though not true enough to justify the slur, is that some of the translations, especially those of the Library's first few decades, do make hard going for the reader, not because they are incomprehensible but because they are written in one of two different varieties of translationese. About the first kind, the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer got it right when he complained that the 1913 Loeb Catullus was translated not into English exactly, but that other dialect, "the construing lingo beloved of schoolboys, but abhorred by man and gods." He had in mind such clunking touches as "remains to be slept the sleep of one unbroken night" for Catullus' *suave nax est perpetua una dormienda*, a solution which confirms, as though to satisfy a schoolteacher, the translator's grasp of the future perfect passive, whatever the cost to English idiom.

The second kind of translationese aims for a lofty register, vaguely archaic with its sprinkling of yea verilies and forsooths, an English of no recognizable time or place. You get it in the 1924 prose translation of the *Iliad*, by A. T. Murray, where Menelaus has just hurled his spear at Paris:

Through the bright shield went the mighty
spear, and through the corselet, richly dight,

did it force its way; and straight on beside his flank the spear shone through his tunic; but he bent aside and escaped black fate. Then the son of Atreus drew his silver-studded sword, and raising himself on high smote the horn of his helmet; but upon it his sword shattered in pieces three, aye, four, and fell from his hand.

Not for reading at long stretches, but Murray, here and throughout, is in fact a good guide to the sense of Homer's Greek. His Loeb is not to be read, but consulted, by the undergraduate stuck on a construction, or the former student having a fresh look at Greek in middle age, or by the curious coming to Greek for the first time. For these purposes the Loeb's have always been valuable. The truth about those old Loeb translations is not that they are, as the joke has it, incomprehensible, but honorably serviceable. Admittedly, if your Greek is good enough, it is easier to follow the thread of the original than to pick your way through the Spenserian pastiche of "richly dight" and "shattered in pieces three, aye, four."

But then if your Greek were good enough, you wouldn't be reading the Loeb edition, would you? Therein lies a key to the academic animus against the Loeb's: the anxiety that such convenient translations are as much a cause of the decline of Latin and Greek as a symptom. There is some justice in such fretting. The temptation, when you are supposed to be construing a knotty passage of Thucydides, to resolve the problem with a stolen glance at the right-hand page, proves too much for many students. (*Credite experto*, alas.) So it is understandable for teachers to see the Loeb's as an all-too-convenient crib which erodes the discipline needed to master the ancient languages.

The prejudice has even deeper sources. The Loeb's represent a step in the democratization of classical literature, a process underway since the nineteenth century, when an aspiring middle class, together with working-class autodidacts, clamored for access to the Greek and Latin masterpieces which their merely English education had denied

them. A large translation industry rose to meet the demand for workmanlike but serviceable renderings of classical literature. A boon, surely? The classics finally reaching the wide audience they deserve? Yes, but. The people tended to get not the classics exactly, but the classics in paraphrase; they turned to translations, but not to the Latin and Greek languages. In that sense, the more popular the classics became, the more concessions had to be made for ignorance of the ancient languages themselves. Few classicists have ever held the extreme view that in order to preserve the ascendancy of the discipline no quarter must be given to accessibility. But many of them have felt a twinge of regret at this or that further popular accommodation.

The last twenty years or so have brought a number of such concessions. In 1990, for example, the Greek scholar Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones broke with tradition by writing the preface to his new Oxford edition of Sophocles not, as had been customary, in Latin, but in English. His chief reason (that readers of Greek can no longer be assumed to have already mastered Latin) was perfectly sound, and it was generous of Lloyd-Jones to make the preface accessible to those who would otherwise be needlessly excluded. Yet one could approve of the innovation while at the same time feeling that it reflected the decline of the tradition.

Similarly: until a few years back, scholars never felt the need—would never have stooped—to translate the Greek and Latin passages they quoted in their books and articles. Now publishers ordinarily require them to do so. Again, even those who welcome such a development may also feel it to be another nail driven in the coffin of classical studies. The Loeb's embody that paradox. I might concede that Kindles and Nooks both extend more widely the blessings of reading, while at once hastening the demise of reading, or the kinds of reading I prefer. In such a way, the Loeb Library has sometimes been thought to hasten the demise of classics as a discipline even as it preserves and promotes them. The Loeb's are among the best emblems of the mixed blessing that is the democratization of the classics.

Given the altruism of its founder, it is a shame the Loeb Library has suffered these resentments. The son of the head of a major New York banking firm, James Loeb (1867–1933) could hardly escape a career in the family business, where he made a tidy fortune. His heart, though, lay with the Greek studies he had loved as a Harvard undergraduate, so when the stress of banking drove him to early retirement, he was eager to direct his resources into the service of the classics. He announced his plan for the Loeb Classical Library in 1911; within two years the first thirty volumes had appeared. For the remaining twenty-two years of his life he supervised the project and, upon his death, bequeathed the whole enterprise to Harvard University.

By the early 1970s, the Library had run into trouble. Its trustees were not being replaced when they died or retired. The business office in Massachusetts was not kept abreast of the activities of the editorial office in London. Production costs were exceeding income. The Library might have gone under if not for the appointment, in 1973, of a new trustee, the Harvard classicist Zeph Stewart (from whose unpublished account of the Loeb's history I am drawing). With great foresight, he appointed both a new general editor, Latinist George Goold, and a canny business manager, Brian Murphy, whose respective skills were to save the Library from extinction.

The next two decades brought the Library financial stability, so that by 1990 Goold could inaugurate a program of revising, and in some cases, replacing, old editions, while at the same time commissioning entirely new volumes. Amid this flourishing Goold retired and, to the Library's further good fortune, was succeeded by Jeffrey Henderson of Boston University. Henderson is probably the world's leading Aristophanes scholar, and his own Loeb editions of Aristophanes are exemplary of the high quality of the Library's volumes—in the case of some of the more obscure authors, the only editions available—under his general editorship. The translations can no longer be sneered at: they are clear, idiomatic, and accurate, and

(as in Henderson's Aristophanes) no longer bowdlerized. Introductions, notes, and other apparatus, though intended for non-specialist readers, meet high scholarly standards. Three to five new editions appear annually, and there are plans for the whole Library to be digitized and placed online, where its contents can be searched and manipulated. Because the Library has coincided with the ascension of English as the global lingua franca, classics departments around the world make it a point to acquire the whole set—a notable reversal of the old *invidium academicum*. Remarkably, the Library now turns a profit which, in accordance with the stipulation of James Loeb, is directed, in the form of grants, to support the work of classicists and archaeologists. Altogether, it is one of the few cultural institutions which is getting better and better. The days for condescending to the Loeb Classical Library are over.

We have hardly begun, though, to take stock of the Library's contribution to literary culture. One unwritten chapter in the history of English literature is the story of how the Loeb's have gone into the making of new literature in the past hundred years. The moment that the Library entered the consciousness of English writers can be pinpointed to May 14, 1917 when, in the pages of the *Times Literary Supplement*, a major novelist stuck up for the Loeb's as striking a blow for every reader who happens not to be a professional classicist, but an amateur in all its worthy senses. Among which class of readers the author—Virginia Woolf—was pleased to count herself:

To those who count themselves lovers of Greek in the sense that some ragged beggar might count himself the lover of an Empress in her robes, the Loeb Library, with its Greek or Latin on one side of the page and its English on the other, came as a gift of freedom to a very obscure but not altogether undeserving class. The existence of the amateur was recognized by the publication of this Library, and to a great extent made respectable. He was given the means of being an open and unabashed amateur, and made to feel that no one point-

ed the finger of scorn at him on that account; and in consequence, instead of exercising his moribund faculties almost furtively upon some chance quotation met in an English book he could read a whole play at a time, with his feet on the fender.

To fend off the reproach that would attach to the Loeb's was more of a feat than Woolf's generous defense of the amateur could achieve, as we have seen. But she was right (despite classicists' fear that bilingual editions would discourage mastery of the languages) in predicting that the Loeb's would sometimes lead readers back to the Latin and Greek they had once studied and half-recalled:

With such treatment, too, his little stock of Greek became improved, and occasionally would be rewarded with one of those moments of instant understanding which are the flower of reading. In them we seem not to have read so much as to recollect what we have heard in some other life.

This is an acknowledgment that a *culture* of the classics—in which non-specialist readers enjoy a reasonable and feeling acquaintance with ancient literature—is as important as the *discipline* of the classics, that narrower society of professionals who must uphold standards of scholarly excellence. The Loeb's, Woolf foresaw, could minister to the one group without outraging the other. She prophesied that the Library would become an institution: "We shall never be independent of our Loeb." Gibraltar may tumble, but our Loeb is here to stay.

Yet none of Woolf's insights is as important as the fact of their having issued *from* Virginia Woolf. For the Loeb's, as the twentieth century rolled on, would resonate not only with the general reader but also novelists, playwrights, and especially poets. Among these was W. H. Auden, a poet of strong classical temperament who nevertheless required the occasional bit of help with his Latin. The Loeb's supplied this need, but they also entered into his writing. When, in

his 1937 radio play *Hadrian's Wall*, he needed to put words into the mouth of an ancient Briton resisting Roman invaders, Auden lifted whole sentences, almost unaltered, from Maurice Hutton's 1914 Loeb edition of Tacitus' *Agricola*. In doing so, he was revisiting the scene of an earlier, subtler, plundering. As John Fuller has shown, Hutton's elegant construal of one of Agricola's rhetorical epigrams, slightly altered, found its way into Auden's 1931 poem "Now from my window-sill I watch the night."

Auden concealed his debts to the Loeb Library, but a recent development finds poets making the Loeb's not only a source, but also a subject, for their poetry. It's as if a formerly unseen stage prompter, accustomed to whispering lines to the actors, had been invited onto the stage himself. Nearly two decades ago, the American poet Donald Hall, in *The Museum of Clear Ideas* (1993), set about clearing some fresh poetic ground for himself by making a modern adaptation of each of the thirty-eight poems in Horace's first book of odes. Among them is the so-called "Cleopatra Ode," which celebrates the victory of Octavian—the future Augustus—over Marc Antony and his Egyptian consort. The first stanza famously calls for a relaxation of war-time austerity:

Nunc est bibendum. nunc pede libero
pulsanda tellus; nunc saliaribus
ornare pulvinar deorum
tempus erat dapibus, sodales.

If you consulted the current Loeb edition, you would find the following translation by the superb Latinist Niall Rudd:

Now let the drinking begin! Now let us thump
the ground with unfettered feet! Now is the
time, my friends, to load the couches of the
gods with a feast fit for the Salii!

But Rudd's translation is very recent: it appeared in 2004. Before then, anyone coming to Horace through the Loeb Library would have been in the hands of the Cornell University professor Charles E. Bennett, whose

1914 translation of the odes enjoyed an extraordinary ninety-year run. For a great many readers in the twentieth century—teenage me included—Bennett's Horace was the first encounter with that poet's lyrics. His rendering of the Cleopatra Ode begins like this:

Now is the time to drain the flowing bowl,
now with unfettered foot to beat the ground
with dancing, now with Salian feast to deck the
couches of the gods, my comrades!

Even in 1914 this may have felt, to some readers, as though Bennett were addressing them from the top of fairly lofty stilts. Eighty years on, this kind of diction offered Donald Hall an occasion for comedy. The opening of Hall's version of the poem, whose *aggiornamento* turns on celebrating the defeat, at the polls, of an odious U.S. senator, accordingly plays not only upon Horace's ode, but also teasingly frets about Bennett's particular translation of it:

Nunc est bibendum. To condescend the phrase
into the preferred demotic—Latin that
plain folks talk, picking up English from
the cowboy and High Dutch
from the sergeant—

we may translate the suggestion, "let's get burnt,"
or choose the style of C. E. Bennett (Cornell
University, nineteen-fourteen):

"Now is the time to drain the
flowing bowl."

What is a credible register in which to voice Horace in 1993? "Let's get burnt" will not quite do, but neither anymore will Bennett's "Now is the time to drain the flowing bowl." Dramatizing the translator's predicament, Hall pokes fun at Loeb translationese. Part of the force of his poem lies not only in the rhetorical distance it achieves from Bennett's grandiloquence, but also in drawing attention to that distance. To take the trouble to signal the distance in time (and not merely "1914," but "nineteen-fourteen"), also bolsters the effect, as does citing, as the Loeb title-page does, the translator's credentials ("Cornell University"). To invoke all this is

to impute long familiarity with Bennett's Loeb, as though from distant school or college days, revisited now with an adult's ironic detachment. The Loeb's by now are no longer only stepping-stones to classical culture (as in Woolf's review) or (as in Auden) a trove of hints for English writers. They are an institution, and as such susceptible of debunking. They are also part of our past, part of a lifetime's mental furniture, worthy subjects of literature when our mental furniture wants rearranging.

It's not just Bennett's translation, though, that Hall is looking at as he rewrites the Cleopatra Ode. The face-en-face format of the Loeb's encourages binocular vision, and Hall shows himself duly attending to the Latin on the left-hand page, in that his English poem reconstructs exactly the syllable-count of Horace's Latin stanzas: two lines of eleven syllables each, then nine in the third, and ten in the fourth. One of the potentialities of the Loeb's is that they may lead the curious from the English back to the Greek or Latin, even if only, at the very least, to an apprehension of the shapes of the original poem's stanzas. (In my own case, a lifetime's appreciation of Horace was precipitated not by reading Bennett's prose translations, but by my fascination at the sight of the intricate stanza forms opposite, though I could not yet read the Latin.) The mere presence of the ancient originals on the facing page can shape—in Hall's case, literally *shaped*—the English of modern writers who allow their eyes to wander from recto to verso. This binocular effect is embodied most tellingly in Hall's noticing that Bennett's line "Now is the time to drain the flowing bowl," though presented as prose, reads like a line of iambic pentameter, and its ten syllables correspond conveniently to the ten syllables required in the second stanza's fourth line. To have the Greek or Latin, and not just the translation, in sight can be a spur to invention.

On the eve of the Loeb's centenary, Seamus Heaney published "The Riverbank Field" in *The Human Chain* (2010), an elegant meditation upon, and rewriting of, a passage from Virgil's *Aeneid* which takes the

relevant volume of the Loeb Classical Library as its point of departure:

Ask me to translate what Loeb gives as
"In a retired vale . . . a sequestered grove"
And I'll confound the Lethe in Moyola

By coming through Back Park down from
Grove Hill
Across Long Rigs on to the riverbank—
Which way, by happy chance, will take me past

The *domos placidas*, "those peaceful homes"
Of Upper Broagh. Moths then on evening water
It would have to be, not bees in sunlight,

Midge veils instead of lily beds; but *stet*
To all the rest: the willow leaves
Elysian-silvered, the grass so fully fledged

And unimprinted it can't not conjure thoughts
Of passing spirit-troops, *animae, quibus*
altera fato Corpora debentur, "spirits," that is,

"To whom second bodies are owed by fate."

What's new here is the presence of the single, unqualified word—"Loeb"—as all that Heaney needs to summon a range of ideas and feelings. The idea, for instance, of a received cultural standard, needing no introduction or explanation, a baseline from which Heaney can effect a creative deviation, transposing Virgil's Elysian Fields into the topography of his own Irish homeland.

More than that, though: this is a poem about ghosts, spirits who, though they have long ago shed their mortal bodies, yet linger in existence, available to converse with whatever mortals who, like Aeneas, can find the key to their world. The Loeb Classical Library is such an underworld, an Elysian Fields where the brightest ghosts of antiquity of all ages are gathered together, like the company of pagan poets in Dante, available for conversation with the living. And up to this point in the poem, the words of H. R. Fairclough's Loeb translation, altered only by ellipses, serve Heaney well enough.

It's in the last third of the poem, though, that Heaney takes leave of the Loeb, to

speak instead "in his own words," as when, a schoolboy, he had been called upon by the Latin master to construe a passage:

And now to continue, as enjoined to often,
"In my own words":

"All these presences
Once they have rolled time's wheel a thousand
years
Are summoned here to drink the river water

So that memories of this underworld are shed
And soul is longing to dwell in flesh and blood
Under the dome of the sky."

Every good translation is a rebirth. Old works in ancient languages are latent potentialities craving fresh embodiment. Heaney honors the Loeb by respectfully parting ways with it; he sheds the older incarnation of Virgil in order to effect this new one. His method (translation and adaptation) is at one with his theme (reincarnation); the Loeb is not only the poem's source, but part of its potent substance. "We shall never be independent of our Loeb": but what had been a question of dependence for Virginia Woolf becomes, in Heaney, a matter of fruitful interdependence.

I have a little apocalyptic fantasy that involves the collection of Loeb's in my local library. It's a complete set, from Homer's rosy-fingered dawn to the twilight of Ammi-anus Marcellinus. The very sight of it is reassuringly tidy: all the sprawling energies of a thousand years of Greek and Roman thought and song, distilled and compacted into these snug matching volumes, the Greek bound in olive drab, the Latin in scarlet. Run your fingers over the spines. Here are The Classics.

Then comes a nuclear holocaust. My local library, like others around the world, is mostly pulverized, but an accident involving molten rubber preserves the case of Loeb's intact within a sealed airtight cavity beneath the rubble. Centuries elapse and deposit their layers of sediment. Above ground, the descendants of the survivors plod on, speaking a crude version of English, and when their

vestigial civilization is at last stable enough to permit cultivation of the liberal arts, their curiosity turns to the prior civilization, ours, whose evident sophistication is attested only in the occasionally exposed ruin, or in fragments of excavated texts. Of this second category, a half-page of Danielle Steele, the corner of a Dunkin' Donuts advert, and the odd shred of *Paradise Regained* are all scrutinized, edited, and interpreted with equal zeal. The fragments are exasperating: they imply a vast literature, and behind it a teeming culture, all tantalizingly out of reach.

Until one day when excavation unseals that underground cavity, and for the first time in so many centuries, sunlight falls on those green and red spines. The whole Loeb Classical Library, dedicated to preserving whatever could be salvaged from an even earlier lost civilization, has itself survived intact. The excavators fall upon the cache and discover not only the English (which they can mostly make out, though it appears to them as remote as Chaucer to us) but also, to their astonishment, on the facing pages, two strange, even more ancient languages, one with an unfamiliar alphabet. Amid a storm

of speculations it is posited that the English is the key to the other two tongues, and in time a latter-day Champollion steps forward and reconstructs the grammar of Latin and Greek. His successors, pioneer scholars of the recovered ancient languages, are at first awestruck—what are these voices speaking out of the dust?—and then electrified, as they begin to read and assimilate Homer and Sophocles and Lucretius and Augustine. These voices must be emulated; the standards are daunting but stimulating; though ancient, they point the way to something new. Academies are organized for teaching the new languages; young souls (they will become poets and historians and scientists) are once again smitten by the songs of Sappho and Catullus, the grave brilliance of Thucydides and Tacitus, the searching effervescence of Plato's Socrates and Aristotle's dogged earthbound inquisitiveness. The post-apocalyptic world shrugs off its torpor, hums with ideas and energy and hope.

I suppose what I mean by all this is that it is good to know that the Loeb Classical Library is there, patiently waiting, in case any civilization (not least our own present one) should require a renaissance.

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