

ARTS & LETTERS

Translating Homer

"Winged Words: On Translating Homer" by Peter Jones, in *Encounter* (Jan. 1988), 44 Great Windmill St., London W1V 7PA, United Kingdom.

The Roman statesman Cato the Elder (234–149 B.C.) counseled young orators: *rem tene, verba sequentur*—"Keep a grip on the argument, and the words will follow." Jones, a senior lecturer in classics at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, England, agrees with Cato's advice. Translators, he argues, should conserve each sentence in the original text.

A translation is a "historical statement," an interpretation shaped by both individual bias and contemporary fashion. When Alexander Pope (1688–1744) translated Homer's *Iliad* between 1713 and 1720, his heavily classicized poetry ("Gazing he spoke, and kindling at the view/His eager Arms around the Goddess threw") may have been well suited to the Miltonic ideals of 18th-century England, but it amounted to a reconceptualization more than a translation of Homer's Greek.

"Let us abandon once and for all the chimaera of 'the literal translation,'" urges Jones. Even "word-for-word" requires the translator to choose from among different shades of meaning from the original text. For example, one-third of the 27,000 lines of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are repetitions of the same phrases or passages. While "fixed, [Greek] hexametric ways of saying things" are necessary for accurate scansion (or poetic meter) of each verse in an epic poem, Jones views repetitions as "so much a part of the essence of Homer" that they must be retained.

Epithets such as "much-enduring Odysseus" are used in so many different contexts that it is hard to find an exact English equivalent. For example, the phrase *luto gownata kai philon etor* ("his knees and own heart were released") describes Homer's characters when they are, variously, in great danger, receiving tragic news, or recognizing a relative.

Unlike other contemporary translators, Jones believes that English prose captures Homer's "words and arguments" better than verse, which does more damage to Homer's text. Translators, he concludes, should use "clear, strong, idiomatic English" that captures "something of the poetry of the original."

OTHER NATIONS

Sovs on the Dole

"Glasnost and Unemployment: The Labour Pains of Perestroika" in *The Economist* (Dec. 26, 1987), 25 St. James's St., London SW1A 1HG, United Kingdom.

On October 9, 1930, Josef Stalin declared unemployment abolished in the Soviet Union. To this day, the Soviet Constitution makes work not only a right but an obligation. Even so, joblessness exists, and it is bound to increase regardless of how—and how far—Mikhail Gorbachev's economic *perestroika* ("restructuring") proceeds.

OTHER NATIONS

Soviet unemployment, according to *The Economist*, takes three forms. Some is "frictional"; at any time, two percent of all Soviet workers are moving to new jobs. Another one percent are "parasites," those who lack formal employment—vagabonds, black marketeers, and dissidents. (Poet Joseph Brodsky, the 1987 Nobel laureate, was once classed as a parasite.)

But the biggest problem is "hidden unemployment." There are uncounted millions of Soviets who have jobs but produce nothing, for many reasons: lack of supplies, broken machinery, sheer laziness, or the tendency of factory bosses to hoard labor. Managers who fire workers must find new posts for them. And "extra people come in handy for the 'storming' periods . . . when the rush is on to meet plan targets."

But for the first time, layoffs are occurring. Between 1984 and 1985, 12,000 workers (10 percent of the staff) of the Byelorussian railway were fired and transferred to other jobs—their wages were allotted to the survivors as incentives to work harder. Similar cuts followed at 10 other railways and two subway lines. And unemployment benefits, officially nonexistent, are appearing; 3,200 bureaucrats fired from agricultural ministries in 1985 received three months' pay.

More is yet to come. Last year, Soviet Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov told the Supreme Soviet that 13 percent of all state-run enterprises may close. By 1990, 60,000 employees of government ministries may be sacked. And an economist for Gosplan, the state planning committee, predicts that 13 to 19 million jobs may be eliminated by the century's end, as workers are transferred from overmanned factories to the "rudimentary service industries."

If Soviet managers are to be free to lay off workers, *The Economist* observes, the government must lift old barriers that discourage workers from moving to find new jobs. Abolishing the "internal passport" system, easing the housing shortage, and making part-time jobs more common will provide the mobile labor force needed for *perestroika* to succeed. Without these changes, workers may well prefer the "charming stability" of the old order, where, as the familiar Soviet joke puts it, "They pretend to pay us and we pretend to work."

African Delusions

"Four Myths About Africa" by Nick Eberstadt, in *The National Interest* (Winter 1987-88), 1112 16th St. N.W., Ste. 540, Washington, D.C. 20036.

Why are many sub-Saharan African nations plagued by failing economies? The prime causes, maintains Eberstadt, a visiting scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, are government mismanagement and misdirected foreign aid programs.

Western efforts to aid these young nations, he argues, are based on "myths." Among them:

- *Africa's high population growth reflects increased birthrates.* Actually, says Eberstadt, the prime cause is falling death rates. Population control programs, such as those of the U.S. Agency for International Development, are doomed because they aim at lowering fertility—ignoring