

Translations

By Arthur Goldman

*In nova fert animus multas dicere formas
Corpora.*

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 1

Now I am ready to tell how bodies are changed
into different bodies.

(Translated by Ted Hughes)

My soul would sing of metamorphoses.

(Translated by Allen Mandelbaum)

My purpose is to tell of bodies which have been transformed into shapes of a
different kind.

(Translated by Mary Innes)

I.

Two months before I began my first teaching job I received a letter from a close friend. My latest letter to her was a greeting followed by several pages of angst, a complete catalog of the uncertainties and fears precipitated by my acceptance of a job offer to teach Middle School Latin at a small private school in Dartmouth, Massachusetts. I had reasons for being nervous. I had no formal experience, no formal training and, the truth was, I didn't really know Latin very well. Being a good reader and knowing me well, she ignored everything in the letter save one line. I seem to have written something like, "In one month I will become a Latin teacher." She loved the idea that the change would happen all at once as if I could have just as easily become a duck.

No matter what the contract said, I didn't become a Latin teacher with the first day of school. Nor did I become a duck.

II.

My first introduction to the Latin language was through the very dry, authoritative voices of Charles Jenney, Rogers Scudder, and Eric Baade, the three New England prep school teachers who fathered the standard textbook of the era: *Jenney's First Year Latin*. Although its hegemony has been since challenged by a number of approaches, the moral imperative of learning Latin in the modern world still derives from the way it was formulated in the preface of that book. Very few of the earlier textbooks felt it necessary to justify the study of Latin. Latin was the traditional language of preparatory and parochial schools, bolstered by both religious and secular traditions. By the Sixties, however, education was changing. There were new priorities. The authors of *First Year Latin*, which was first published in that decade, knew that they were facing a market where Latin was not compulsory but merely one of a number of possible language choices a student might consider.

The edition of *First Year Latin* I used in eighth grade began with the following promise:

We realize that it is very important to today's students to select school subjects that will have relevance and meaning for their future. Therefore, we wish to compliment you on your choice of Latin. It is a choice that you will never regret.

Jenny et al. gave six reasons why a student should learn Latin. This same rationale appears in different forms in a number of other textbooks and publications. Latin is portrayed as being an excellent training regimen for the mind – teaching discipline,

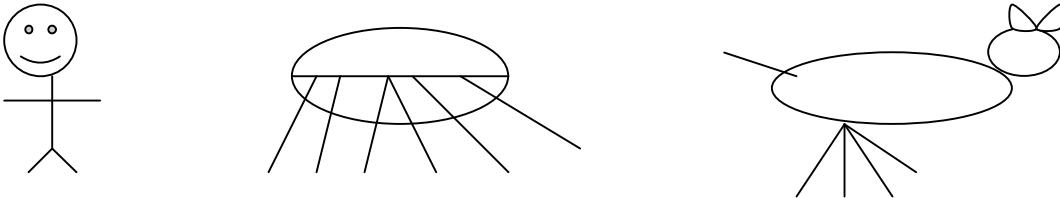
improving memory, fostering reasoning ability. Latin is also seen as a good starter language – a gateway to French, Spanish or Italian. The preface predicts that you can add “500-1000 English words to your vocabulary every year” you study Latin, and since “one of the greatest assets you can have when you enter the marketplace is the gift of speech,” what better language for those up-and-coming business types to take? Not just a more “colorful vocabulary,” but, as an added bonus, proper grammar and improved writing skills. Since “completing questionnaires and writing reports and summaries are important aspects of many jobs,” Latin is the essence of practicality. But Latin is also culture – “art, music, mythology, literature, architecture and law.” Finally, the authors resort to the bandwagon appeal in a rhetorical question that feels almost desperate. “Educated people from all nations have studied Latin for two thousand years, Don’t you want to be in this number?”

Strangely enough, I did.

III.

I don’t introduce the full Latin verb until the students begin their second year of Latin. The second year of Latin is not the same as Second Year Latin. Like many middle schools, we split First Year Latin into a two-year sequence beginning in seventh grade. Sixth graders take a sort of hybrid pre-Latin/language preparation course. As we start the eighth grade, I try to draw a roadmap of where we will be going.

I begin my explanation of the full Latin verb with a drawing that looks something like this:



Since this is not the first time my students have seen my drawings, they recognize the symbols immediately: person, eyeball, dog. As a thought experiment, we imagine that they have found these symbols on a cave wall, presumably drawn by some maladroit cave dweller. I ask them to speculate on what the drawings might mean.

They suggest: *A man sees a dog*. For some reason, this is always the first guess. But those three simple drawings have a much wider range of possibilities. There are at least five things we need to know about this act of seeing.

First – we need to know whom that stick figure represents. Not the name, but who he or she is relative to us. Is the picture self-referential – *I see the dog*? Is it an address to someone else – *you see the dog*? Is it a statement about someone else – *he sees the dog*? This is the first attribute of the Latin verb: the concept of *person*.

Next we have *number*. Is that one person or does it represent people generally? Latin, like English, has two “numbers”: singular and plural. *I see the dog*. *We see the*

dog. Other languages have more. Greek has a dual. Some indigenous South American languages have two plurals; a small one and one that means a whole lot.

If we want to know when this seeing is taking place, we need to know *tense*. Latin has six: present, imperfect, future, perfect, pluperfect and future perfect. *The man sees the dog. The man was seeing the dog. The man will see the dog.*

But this assumes that this sentence is about the man at all. Could it be that the dog is the real focus, that it is being seen, and it is just consequently by a man? *Voice*: active or passive. *The man sees the dog. The dog is seen by the man.*

Finally, we need to know whether this picture represents something real as opposed to something that might happen, we wish would happen or possibly could happen if other things are true. This is *mood*: indicative or subjunctive. *The man sees the dog. Would that the man see the dog. Let the dog be seen, man!*

The ending on a Latin verb contains all of this information. It is a compact powerhouse of communicative precision. *Videbis* – you will see (second person singular, future active indicative). *Videamur* – let us be seen (first person plural, present passive subjunctive). I pull out my dice. The six sides of the first one are labeled with person and number (1st person singular, 1st person plural, 2nd person singular etc.). The second shows all six tenses. The third has the moods, each repeated twice. We roll for verbs.

3 persons x 2 numbers x 6 tenses x 2 voices x 2 moods is a total of 144 forms for each verb, not including participles, gerunds and the imperative. If we are getting picky, Latin is missing a few tenses in the subjunctive, so the actual number is a few less. Still,

they would be utter hell to memorize individually. Luckily, there are patterns. By the end of eighth grade, nearly all of the students can fully conjugate regular Latin verbs and a good smattering of the irregular ones. They can produce all of the forms, but they rarely find them interesting. I imagine that I am giving them the bare bones of poetry, the structure upon which all expression depends, a vast grid of possibility. For most students, all that my enthusiasm translates into is a lot of boring quizzes.

IV

I first took Latin because it was the closest I could come to taking Greek. In fourth grade, the history teacher from the high school came to our class and taught us the Greek alphabet. We must have been studying Greece. I was fascinated. It was like a code, these strange, mysterious letters used by an ancient civilization. The coolest part was that the Greek he was teaching us, unlike the Greek my grandfather spoke, was a dead language which nobody used anymore. I'm not sure why that appealed to me so much but I remembered it very clearly when I had to choose a language in eighth grade. We had our choice of Latin, German, French, or Spanish. I chose Latin. I liked my languages dead.

In eighth grade we did the first half of Latin 1 and there were eight of us. The soccer coach taught the course. He was a great soccer coach. The next year we were taught by a very young, female history teacher from Lumberton, NC. To this day, I still speak Latin with a drawl. They added several ninth graders who were just beginning

Latin on the misguided assumption that they would catch up easily. We spent most of the first semester reviewing. We almost completed Latin 1 by the end of the year.

We weren't moving at much of a clip anyway. Latin was the recommended language for anyone identified as having trouble with English on the theory that it would be easier (you don't have to speak it) and that it would serve as a review of English grammar and vocabulary. There were now twelve of us, three of whom had chosen to be in the class. Morale wasn't high. I spent most of the year composing semi-obscene poetry in Latin about our teacher, whom I suppose I had some sort of a crush on. Little did I know how traditional obscene poetry was in Latin.

Year three was a combined class with those in year two which, technically, was still the second half of a normal First Year Latin course. By our Junior year, when we finally got a teacher to ourselves, the three survivors of the original class had taken the equivalent of three years of Latin 1. This turned out to be excellent training for my future career.

V

To my count, the first century Latin poet Martial wrote at least five poems about teeth. In addition to his epic summary of all mythology, Ovid wrote what might be described as a dating guide. Catullus, whose formulation of the love poem still echoes in much of modern schmaltz, wrote a rather interesting poem about body odor that includes the line:

Valle sub alarum trux habitare caper
A fierce goat lives in your armpits.

Roman poets did not seem to have a hierarchy of poetic topics. The best of the poets cover not just the full range of emotional experience, but practically the full range of human experience. There are scientific treatises entirely in verse. Martial wrote a series of poems celebrating athletic events. The very best of the Classical poets wrote verse so obscene that for years the editors of the Loeb Classical Library chose to render the translations of select passages into Italian rather than English (if they translated them at all).

One of my favorite Latin poems is simply a very, very old joke.

Non cenat sine apro noster, Tite, Caecilianus.
Bellum convivam Caecilianus habet.

Titus, our friend Caecilianus never dines without boar.
Caecilianus has the best guest.

How many other two thousand year old jokes do you know?

VI

I graduated college with a hyphenated major, “Classics-Religion Interdepartmental.” It was almost entirely a retrospective major, chosen in my senior year based on coursework I had taken without any clear plan. It just sort of happened that I had taken a lot of courses in those two fields. Usually Classics is defined as Latin and Greek. After my high school experience, I had happily abandoned Latin and took eight

semesters of Greek, two semesters of Old English (Anglo-Saxon) and two semesters of Coptic which is a Middle-Egyptian language related to Greek.

My degree read Classics. Due to some studies showing a strong correlation between Latin and SAT scores, Latin was undergoing a revival in the late eighties and there was a shortage of Latin teachers. I had registered with a teacher placement agency which repeatedly sent me to interview at schools where I had to explain that I might be willing to teach AP Latin, but that it would involve me teaching at a higher level than I had ever taken. I kept suggesting that I would make an excellent English teacher. Finally, in late June, a desperate headmaster brushed aside my pesky objections that I really didn't know Latin. After all, I knew Greek, and this was just middle school Latin. He figured I could keep at least one step ahead. The big question was whether I could handle an eighth grade homeroom. I took the job and spent the summer retaking Latin 1 for the fourth time. I wanted to teach.

That summer I found myself in a second hand bookshop in Harvard Square, standing in front of the Classics shelf. If I was going to teach Latin, by golly I was going to read some. I bought a well-marked copy of the *Selected Works of Ovid* which, according to the notation on the fly leaf, had once belonged to a Blee Andrew, class of '48 who lived at 10 Webb. Blee had also left some helpful notes about the difference between the copulative (*et que*) and the adversative (*sed*) conjunctions and the somewhat mysterious quote, perhaps advice, "*aut disce, aut discede.*" Either learn or leave. I made my choice. The description of the creation of the world, with which Ovid begins his

Metamorphoses, became the first poetry I read in Latin. By the time I started teaching that fall, I had memorized those lines. I was going to become a Latin teacher.

VII

The title of Ovid's epic is not a Latin word, but a Greek one. *Metamorphoses* are literally the changing of shapes – transfigurations. Saints, angels, and languages are translated because they are moved from one place to another intact, or in the case of languages, as nearly intact as possible. A metamorphosis is a complete change; a man into a donkey, a woman into a tree.

Ovid begins the *Metamorphoses* with an invocation to the gods. He announces his theme in the very first line.

*In nova fert animus multas dicere formas
Corpora.*

In the roughest terms: The spirit/mind (*animus*, presumably his) leads him to speak of many forms in new bodies. The third word of his poem is *fert*, the third person singular present active indicative of the irregular verb *fero*. The glossary in the back of Blee's book offers "to bear, carry, bring," as the first definition of *fero* but larger dictionaries give a wider range of meanings including to "carry off," "plunder," "bear children" or, as most likely fits here, "set in motion."

Fero is a very irregular verb. Most Latin verbs change their stem when they form the past participle. A whole slew of verbs, for example, add an "-atum." *Amo* (I love) becomes *amatum* just as *laudo* (I praise) becomes *laudatum*. In contrast, the past

participle of *fero* is simply *latum*. In addition to being an interesting grammatical oddity, this strange transformation from *fero* to *latum* is responsible for producing two different English derivatives. The two forms of *fero* combine with the prefix *trans* to give us both transfer (literally to carry across) and translate (to have been carried across).

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary lists seven distinct definitions for the verb "to translate." These range from the physical, "to change from one place position or condition," to the linguistic, "to change from one language to another," to the technical "to repeat or retransmit by means of an automatic relay." Rarely and archaically, it means "to enrapture;entrance."

VIII

Tom Stoppard, in his play *The Invention of Love*, which dramatizes the life of the poet/classical scholar A.E. Housman, traces the history of the love poem back to the Latin poet Catullus.

Like everything else, like clocks and trousers and algebra, the love poem had to be invented. After millenniums of sex and centuries of poetry, the love poem as understood by Shakespeare and Donne, and by Oxford undergraduates – the true life confessions of the poet in love, immortalizing the mistress, who is actually *the cause of the poem* – that was invented in Rome in the first century before Christ.

(13)

One of the best known of these love poems is a beautiful portrait of quiet jealousy.

It begins with the poet watching a man sit with the woman he loves.

*Ille mi par esse deo videtur,
Ille, si fas est, superare deos
Qui, sedens adversus identidem te
Spectat and audit
Dulce ridentem...*

That man (*Ille*), seems to me to be like a god
That man, if it is allowed, surpasses the gods,
Who, sitting across from you, again and again,
Sees and hears you
Laughing sweetly...

The poem feels personal, a believable scene. The poet continues with a catalog of his symptoms and he chastises himself by name. It is an accessible, beautiful poem. Does it change the way we read it if we acknowledge that it is also a fairly literal translation of a very well known poem written by the Greek poet Sappho five centuries earlier?

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is itself a kind of translation. Almost none of the material in it is what we would today term original. He took hundreds of myths from different sources and freely adapted them to suit his poem, a true epic some fifteen books long. Yet, as Ted Hughes points out in the introduction to his translation, Ovid was not a collector of folk tales like Italo Calvino or the Brothers Grimm. "As a guide to the historic, original forms of the myths, Ovid is of little use. His attitude to the material is that of the many later poets who have adapted what he presents. He, too, is an adaptor. He takes only those tales which catch his fancy and engages each one not further than it liberates his own creative zest" (viii).

IX

After the quick invocation to the Muse, Ovid launches his massive poetical recapitulation of mythology with a description of a proto-universe.

*Ante mare et terras et, quod tegit omnia caelum
Unus erat toto naturae vultus in orbe
Quem dixere Chaos; rudis indigestaque moles,
Nec quicquam nisi pondus iners congestaque eodem
Non bene iunctarum discordia semina rerum.*

The lines have an almost biblical resonance and could have easily been used to describe the big bang. They are some of my favorite lines in Latin. But what do they mean?

The answer depends a lot on whom you ask. Neither the grammar nor the vocabulary involved is too difficult, and I have used it several times as an exercise with students. For now, let's set aside the questions of meter, the power of the consonance in the opening line, the juxtaposition of *indigestaque* and *congestaque* in lines three and four and a number of interesting poetical issues, and focus simply on the words and their meanings.

The first line begins with *Ante* – the preposition “before,” used here temporally. *Ante* governs three nouns in the first line: *mare* (sea), *terras* (lands), and *caelum* (sky). The sky is further qualified by a relative clause *quod tegit omnia* (which covers everything). *Et* simply means and. So the first line reads: “Before the sea and the lands and the sky which covers everything.”

In Latin, adjectives agree with their nouns in case, number and gender which, as a practical consequence, allows the poet to separate the modifier from the modifiee and still

maintain the expectation that the reader can match them up again. In the second line, *Unus* (one) goes with *vultus* (a sort of poetical word for face) and *toto* (whole) describes *orbe* (orb, here the earth). This little reshuffling allows Ovid to appear to say, “One was the whole,” when in fact he is saying “the face of nature on the whole planet was one – singular, the same.” He gets a little play between the singular and the total before we figure out one what or the whole what.

Ovid ends the thought on the next line with another relative clause that names this early state of the universe “Chaos.” The next two and a half lines are in apposition, they describe what this visage called Chaos looks like. Here the English derivatives come close to the Latin meanings. Chaos is a rude (*rudis* -- unformed), undigested (*indigestaque* -- unorganized) mass (*moles* gives the chemistry term mole), not anything but an inert (*iners* -- lifeless) weight (*pondus*), congealed (*congestaque* -- brought together), in the same place (*eodem*).

The last line is another wonderful example Latin’s ability to separate adjectives and nouns for poetic affect. The participle *iunctarum* (having been brought together, and with *non bene*, having been not well brought together) goes with *rerum* – a very common word that is used a lot like the English word “thing,” that vague category of unnamed object. Chaos is the discordant seeds (*discordia semina*) of not well brought together things.

Almost none of the grammar here is beyond the level of the first year Latin student and the definitions of the words are right out of the glossary of Blee Andrew’s old

textbook. At this point as a class we usually reread it in Latin, sticking in the definitions, and feel like we have a pretty good idea what it means.

We then go on and look at the same lines in translation:

Ere land and sea and the all-covering sky
Were made, in the whole world the countenance
Of nature was the same, all one, well named
Chaos, a raw and undivided mass,
Naught but a lifeless bulk, with warring seeds
Of ill-joined elements compressed together.
(Translated by A.D. Melville)

Before the sea and lands began to be,
before the sky had mantled everything,
then all of nature's face was featureless –
what men call chaos: undigested mass
of crude, confused and scumbled elements,
a heap of seeds that clashed, of things mismatched.
(Translated by Allen Mandelbaum)

Before sea or land, before even sky
Which contains all
Nature wore only one mask –
Since called Chaos.
A huge agglomeration of upset.
A bolus of everything – but
As if aborted.
And the arsenal of entropy
Already at war within it.
(Translated by Ted Hughes)

The students begin to object. Where did Mandelbaum get the word scumbled?
“Agglomeration of upset?” “How can *tegit* be “all-covering,” “had mantled,” and “which contains all” ? *Vultus* is a mask, a face and a countenance? The first version is too stiff, the third too loose but the middle one certainly isn't just right.

All but the diehards can see that none of these translations are bad. In fact, in their own ways, all three are outstanding. Each addresses a different aspect of what is inherent in Ovid's poetry and none of the choices, even "scumbled", is without justification. I own four different translations of the *Metamorphoses*. All of them capture something of the original--some of them might be even enjoyable to read in their own right--but even my middle school Latin students can tell that it's just not the same thing.

X

I have been trying to write a poem, which is hard for me. I'm new to poetry, and we aren't really friends yet. So far all of my poems are about how hard it is to write poetry and how great it would be if I could do it well. My words sit there on the page unnecessarily stiff and formal – as if translated poorly out of some obscure ancient tongue.

I like the sound of translated poetry. It is always blunt, not quite right. The best translations show their seams – you know there is something behind this set of words that points to an original, richer, more complex set of meanings that this poem, the translation, can only hint at. Translation is Platonism in action.

I have been trying to write a poem about my students who are trying to write poetry. Amanda said something the other day that struck me as interesting. So far I have:

Amanda says,
Sad poetry is easier to write,
As I marshal the line for recess.

Ignoring the syntax,
Later that day,
I wonder.

Amanda's decided that sweat feels like raindrops,
And Allegra is writing about a dead horse,
Poems on braces, snow balls and gym walks,
Baseball, soccer, nature and truth.

Can one write poetry, without a license, after puberty?

We are all trying to become poets together because I read in one of the books I bought recently on teaching writing that I have to model being a poet. I have been reading poems to them. These are not my Latin students, but I have been sneaking it into our English classes anyway. They weren't impressed that I could spout the opening to the *Metamorphoses* in Latin. It occurs to me that maybe a poem about changing bodies might be metaphorically appropriate and still uninteresting.

XI

Jenney imagined the Latin students of today as the businessmen of tomorrow. One of the disadvantages of teaching middle school and of not staying at the same school for too long is that you rarely hear news of what happens to students. I'm sure that some of my former Latin scholars did go on to work in offices. Some are probably lawyers and doctors. Chances are that almost all of them had to take the SAT. The truth is that Latin probably helped. Still, I was hoping for a less generic outcome.

We live in our verbs, but we don't use them well. We always ask kids what they want to be when they grow up but we want to know what they will do. They can't answer "be smart." Yet, mostly adults want nouns, not verbs. Lawyers don't really law, no business person businesses, architects and contractors don't architect or contract. There are verbs like doctoring and engineering but we describe doctors as practicing medicine and engineers design things. We don't do our professions; we become them.

I did not set out to be a teacher, certainly not a Latin teacher. During spring break of my first year I took a train trip to Chicago. The woman sitting in the seat opposite me was chewing gum ostentatiously. It took all of my self-control to keep me from asking her to spit it out. Eventually I had to move seats. Something had changed.

Or was changing. There was no magic moment when I woke up and realized that chalk now grew from my fingertips and wisdom had discovered my tongue. But the stacks of graded quizzes, the hours of listening to students read the text haltingly, the projects and the note cards, the banquets where we wrapped sheets around ourselves and pretended they were togas, all of the daily stuff of teaching Latin slowly transformed the person I had been.

A Latin teacher is not necessarily a Latin scholar. I conjugate verbs better than I sight read. I have read a fair amount of Latin poetry, some Cicero but almost no Caesar at all. Even after years of teaching Latin, when I find myself in a conversation with serious Romaphiles I often feel like a fraud. But not in the classroom. While it might be useful to know the chronology of Roman emperors by heart, teaching is not knowledge, it's action.

My job is to translate, not words, not even ideas, but the possibility that the effort involved in seemingly small mundane steps leads somewhere. I am a conduit through which the past meets the present.

XII

I have always loved art museums, although I don't know much about art. They may call my college education "liberal arts" but I have never taken courses in studio or appreciation. Nevertheless, I have a great time hanging out in quiet galleries, looking at paintings, sculpture, even the furniture major art museums tend to keep in their basements.

I have always loved art museums, but I never knew what to do with myself in them. There is only so long you can stand in front of a painting, no matter how good it is. If you run by dozens of paintings, you only form rough impressions, and you don't feel like you have seen everything. Two events changed my relationships to museums and made it possible for me to feel like the time I spend there is worthwhile.

In one of my breaks from teaching I had moved to Chicago. I knew almost no one, I had no money and I was working as a temp on Michigan Avenue. The highlight of my week was Tuesday evening when the Art Institute of Chicago, a fabulous and eclectic

museum, was open late without an admission charge. I went every Tuesday, save two, for a year and a half.

Going to a museum weekly is very different from visiting once or twice a year. When you go all of the time you stop worrying about seeing everything and wander a bit more. You notice small things. You revisit certain pieces that become your favorites. Sometimes you pick a particular gallery to explore thoroughly; sometimes you go through scores of rooms stopping only when something catches your eye. Without the pressure of time and expectation, you discover what you hadn't sought.

The second thing that changed my relationship to museums was that during a trip to Italy I bought a leather sketchbook. At first I was afraid to draw in it – a beautifully bound sketchbook should be filled with gorgeous renderings in half-tones and charcoal, not my doodling. But, after I had sacrificed a few pages to the gods of scrawl, I began to sketch regularly – one or two pictures every visit. The drawings themselves are embarrassing. They look nothing like what I have attempted to reproduce, but the activity of drawing is invaluable. It forces me to slow down, to really look at the art, to consider the choices the artist has made, to work my way methodically through the piece.

Translating is like sketching in a familiar museum. Week after week you visit the same site and work your way slowly through a set of lines. In my college philosophy class we read five dialogues of Plato, including the *Republic*, in less than three weeks. In my Greek class we spent the entire semester on the *Symposium*. Each class we struggled through the text, stopping and considering every word, every idea. We couldn't rush

through it – we weren't good enough to move much faster, but our inability to read quickly made the whole experience so much richer. There are disadvantages to competence.

XIII

Was it Spring that Came?
Or was it the year that went?
The Second Last Day.

This is not a Latin poem. It is an early haiku from the 17th century Japanese poet Basho. Although I don't read Japanese, I have developed a fondness for Basho – his odd life history, his enigmatic sparse verse and, to be perfectly honest, his great name. I have no idea how close the words in this translation are to the actual words in Japanese. I assumed, however, that even if I couldn't appreciate the subtleties of the word play or even a sense of how the poem sounded, I could at least understand something of the poem from the images it presents. Basho's poetry is chock full of poetic images.

When I read this poem I was struck immediately with the power and depth expressed in the few simple lines. I marveled at the poetic juxtaposition of spring coming and the year going. Who else but Basho would express the ideas of death and rebirth so succinctly? And not death then rebirth, but more darkly, starting with the possibility of rebirth and then, on second thought, suggesting that it might instead be the changes brought about by death. The ominous "Second Last Day," set off in capital letters in my

text, seemed deeply significant. After all, how can you have any day after the last one? What a great poem.

I was a little put off when Makato Ueda, Basho's biographer and translator, declared this to be "rather trite and contrived" (37). It turns out that almost everything I had considered beautiful and interesting depended on my ignorance of Japanese culture and poetry. "The Second Last Day" isn't an innovative turn of phrase; it is the popular name of the 29th day of the last month of the year – two days before the new year. It just so happened that on the year Basho composed the poem, that date fell on the first day of spring. So the spring coming and the year going are actual calendar events – no snowy images of New Year's eve contrasted with buds of spring. To make matters worse, the same topic was presented by other famous poets – it isn't even an original observation. Basho didn't think it was. For Basho, the originality came from the echo of a famous love poem, "The Tales of Ise," which includes the lines, "Was it you who came/ Or was it I who went." The joke in the poem is the way he adapted the quotation to fit the new situation.

Students often equate translating with matching words. They suppose that each word in one language has an exact counterpart in another. Once you have completed the substitution, you have won the game. But even beyond the subtleties of syntax, the idioms, the resonance and connotations, there is also the problem of culture. It is impossible to use a phrase like "one small step for man" without calling forth the images of the first moon landing. The two simple words, "Call me" followed by any name is a

play on the opening of *Moby Dick*. Every poem contains the history of its genre, its time, and the society from which it derived. There is no such thing as universality.

Translation may be impossible, but that's not to say that it's not worthwhile. We may miss a great deal when we read the opening lines of the *Odyssey*, “Ἀνδρα μοι ἔννεπε μουσα,” which Fitzgerald translates as “Sing in me muse and through me tell the story,” but that doesn't make the story completely unsingable. Part of the fun of translating is doing that traveling, visiting that place far away in time and space. We only really visit when we realize the distance, when we confront the problems of trying to put what is there in our own language.

XIV

The website of National Committee for Latin and Greek offers a more modern rationale for the study of Latin, but the premises are similar to those in my old Jenney textbook. Latin is a chance to look closely at “language itself.” It improves vocabulary, provides an excellent basis for studying modern languages, helps with reading and writing skills and allows access to cultural study. The NCLG then adds what is at this point the biggest draw of Latin today. “Does Latin help your SAT scores?” the site queries. “The answer once again is a definite YES!” (emphasis theirs). Again, Latin is so practical. What can be a better reason for learning a language than higher test scores?

There are probably worse reasons for showing up in a Latin classroom. For me, however, the magic of Latin isn't that it prepares us for anything specific – whether it be

another language, a trip to the art museum or even a better understanding of politics and history. All of those aims assume that the point of education is to enlighten. I think I didn't become a Latin teacher until I began to believe firmly that obfuscation is at least as important as enlightenment. Until then, I taught something too simplified, a facsimile of a language. I grew to love Latin because it confuses what otherwise might be clear. Once the class gets beyond the grammar and delves into that rich stuff of Latin literature, we leave behind the land of certainty. We can't know these people. We can't ask them what they mean. All we have are the words on the page and the rules we've learned, and all we can do is make our best guess and argue about who is coming closest to that impossible goal – a true translation – full meaning dragged from one world into the next. It is a game we cannot win. What more could you ask from a course than a lesson in the limits of knowledge, the exhibition of our own ignorance?

XV

Sometimes a poem deserves a strong misreading. Martial's epigram was clearly intended as an insult to the way an admirer recited his poetry. And yet I can almost read it as advice to the novice translator.

*Quem recitas meus est, o Fidentine, libellus:
sed male cum recitas, incipit esse tuus..*
Epigrams Book 1, 38

The little book, which you recite, O Fidentinus, is mine: but when you recite it badly, it begins to be yours.

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