

## Foreignizing and Domesticating Translations: the Case of Pindar by Steven J. Willett

Pindar is notoriously the most difficult of all Greek poets to translate. The extreme complexity of the formal triadic versification, the elliptical compression of the mythic narratives, the sudden structural shifts, the dark gnomes, the often opaque word order, the aristocratic tenor of his thought and the difficulty of making specific encomiastic details about the victor palatable to a modern audience all present formidable barriers to translation. It should come as no surprise that even partial success in poetic translations of Pindar is rare. Indeed the hazard of translating him is about the same as imitating him: those who try, as Horace warned, fly on Daedalian wings of wax and "vitreo daturus/Nomina ponto" (C.4.2:3-4).

This makes Pindar an excellent test case to study the two contrasting approaches to translation that now dominate much theoretical writing: the foreignizing and the domesticating approaches. In *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (1995), Lawrence Venuti argues that Anglo-American translation theory has been dominated since the seventeenth century by the conviction that the translator should so efface himself, so conceal the labor of transference from source to target language, that the translated text reads as if it had been originally written in the target language. The translator vanishes behind a fluent, idiomatic text that erases every shred of foreignness. American critics are instantly ready to condemn, and publishers to reject, any poetic translation that betrays "translatorese" or attempts to convey the foreign flavor of the original text with consistent fidelity. This is domesticating translation, and Venuti along with a number of other critics have shown the ideological assumptions that underlie it. By contrast, foreignizing translation resists contemporary cultural, stylistic and idiomatic norms in order to convey the full impact of the foreign poetic experience. This is resistive or foreignizing translation. The term "foreignizing" translation has been current in theoretical discussions since Antoine Berman employed it to describe the type of translation advocated by Friedrich Schleiermacher in his essay "Ueber die verschiedenen Methoden des Uebersetzens" (1813). Schleiermacher was of course writing a formal defense of his controversial translations of Plato, but the main argument applies equally to poetic translation. Schleiermacher offers a fundamental opposition: either the translator leaves the author in peace and moves the reader to him, or leaves the reader in peace and moves the author to him. True translation, in Schleiermacher's view, is the first; mere or interpretation or *dolmetschen*, is the second.

Foreignizing translation accepts a great deal of what Walter Benjamin called "agrammaticality" in order to prevent the translation from supplanting the original, something a highly transparent version can easily do in a monolingual society like the United States. It resists the Christian and Ciceronian-Horatian recommendation to translate the spirit rather than, or at the expense of, the letter. The less command an audience has of the original foreign language, the more emphasis needs to be given word-for-word translation even when that strains normal syntax. Idiomatic fluency and transparency conceal the ideological assumptions that have shaped the translation and

are, therefore, profoundly misleading. These assumptions should in fact be made prominent and unavoidable to the reader through selective distortions of normal usage, including (1) archaisms, (2) neologisms, (3) foreign terminology, (4) close tracking of syntax, mood and tense and (5) whenever possible equirhythmics. The very process of creative estrangement involved in foreignizing translation is ultimately more faithful to the original, more honest to the reader and more productive of a permanent contribution to literature.

Hölderlin will serve as my model for the foreignizing translation of Pindar. He produced translations in whole or part of six Olympian and ten Pythian odes. George Steiner says they "represent the most violent, deliberately extreme act of hermeneutic penetration and appropriation of which we have knowledge" (*After Babel*, p. 341). With his usual flare for aphoristic pungency at the price of careful analysis, he proceeds to note the poet's striving for literalness and his use of *figura etymologica*, but concludes that while there are some eloquent passages, most are "forced and unconvincing" (p. 343). I will argue, in fact, that these strange, bewildering versions are—despite Hölderlin's ignorance of metrics and occasional misunderstanding of the Greek—the closest approximation to the experience of hearing the odes that we have. Their very agrammaticality is their success. At the other end of the translation spectrum, we have the absurd imitations of Abraham Cowley or, more recently, the free verse transformations of C. M. Bowra. Between these two extremes lie, with varying degrees of foreignizing or domesticating spirit, the work of Richmond Lattimore, Frank Nisetich and G. S. Conway among others. I will try to assess the successes and failures of each using, as a touchstone, the Russian translations of M. L. Gasparov. In many respects Russian is an ideal language for translating Pindar, and virtually no attention has been given to Russian work by contemporary theoreticians of translation. (One may discard Nabokov's eccentric if entertaining dictates about translation in his prose version of Pushkin.) Gasparov's outstanding work is relatively unknown outside Russia, and deserves better. My focus in all this will be to show that the hidden assumptions of the invisible translator who seeks to eclipse the original text with a translated one are in fact considerably more untruthful than the agrammaticality of a successful foreignizing one. In pursuing this emphasis I will, of course, try to argue what constitutes a successful foreignizing version in the sense of Schleiermacher.

A handout will include all foreign language passages with my English translations.