

1987

## A Few Still Later Words on Translating Homer, or C. S. Calverley and the Victorian Parodic

Patrick G. Scott  
*University of South Carolina - Columbia*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/engl\\_facpub](https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/engl_facpub)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Publication Info

Published in *Postscript*, Volume 4, 1987, pages 9-18.

© 1987 by the Philological Association of the Carolinas on behalf of the contributors

This Article is brought to you by the English Language and Literatures, Department of at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [digres@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:digres@mailbox.sc.edu).

**A Few Still Later Words On Translating Homer  
(and Horace, and Tupper, and Tennyson, and St. Thomasius),  
or C.S. Calverley and the Victorian Parodic**

*Patrick Scott  
University of South Carolina*

By way of preface: I am by background and inclination a simple, essentially narrative, scholar, a literary historian of a rather old-fashioned kind. I felt obscurely that I needed to use a different tack, and I found myself straying across into theoretical self-consciousness, among new men, strange faces, other minds. I greatly admire the dexterity and seriousness with which our modern theorists have exposed the naivety, pretentiousness, and group self-deception of literary criticism in recent decades, but that style is not mine. So I resolved instead to seize the chance, push modern critical theory to the margins or into the footnotes, and adopt a style with which I was more familiar and which I initially believed fully adequate to the function of parodic criticism at the present time.

My foremost design in presenting this Paper is to address a word of exhortation to Messrs. J.M. Dent and Co., the publishers of Everyman's Library. In what follows, the reader will often find me quoting Alexander Tytler. To me, and to older devotees of the Everyman's Library, his name and writings are still, no doubt, familiar. But the world is fast going away from old-fashioned people of our sort, and I learnt with consternation lately from a widely-respected votary of computational stylistics, that he had never so much as heard of Alexander Tytler, and that he half-suspected me of making him up (along with most of the other minor nineteenth-century authors whom I admire). At the time, I simply reminded my gifted colleague, of course, that we all, in a sense, make up the authors we admire, and that at least the authors I make up consist of names and quotations and anecdotes, rather than merely of graphs or statistics, but I knew he didn't know what I was talking about, and that he was impatient at me for trifling with such aesthetical fancies, while he himself, in that electronic arsenal of his in the computer lab, was solving the problem of style. It distresses me to think that the new lights should not only have, in general, a very low opinion of old-fashioned criticism but that they should have it without knowing the best that these older critics can do. And that they are

in this case is clearly owing, in part, to the neglect of Everyman's Library. In the old days, Messrs. Dent used to print and circulate Alexander Tytler's *Essay on the Principles of Translation*, in the old brown cloth, with the gilt Art Nouveau spine and the mock-medieval endpapers which they made familiar to our childhood, but the work has long been allowed to lapse from their list, and is now, I believe, no longer part of Every Man's collection.

Tytler's *Essay* deserves to be circulated as a theoretical study, not only by comparison with the cartloads of rubbish circulated at present under this designation, but for its own sake, and especially for the insight Tytler offers in his fourteenth (and shortest) chapter, when he suggests that burlesque and parody can best be understood by reference to "the laws of serious translation." Tytler notes in his fifth chapter that if a translator fails justly to discern or happily to imitate the style and manner of his original, "let him be ever so thoroughly master of the sense of his author, he will present him through a distorting medium, or exhibit him often in a garb that is unsuitable to his character" (114), and Tytler has the breadth and flexibility of mind to recognize, not only that this distortion and regarbing is in some degree inevitable (132-133, 260-264), but that it can also be deliberate, and that it makes no difference in principle whether the regarbing is in a second and ill-fitting language or, within the same language, in an ill-fitting style (351-352).

Only the other day, I was reading somewhere about an American professor at a conference in Amsterdam who, without acknowledgment, has reduced Tytler's insight to a luminescent slogan on a plastic button: "To translate is always to traduce," "Every translation is another traduction," or words to that effect, and this slogan, which I like to think of as Professor Roman Jakobson's Golden Rule done into English, embodies a profound truth, once we view it, not as an accusation, but as a liberation. Tytler himself argues, or we may read him as arguing, that, both interlingually or intralingually, parody gets its characteristic effect by controlled mistranslation, a deliberate and well-signalled misunderstanding of the source-text (351). In the terms made familiar to us by that gifted and prolific scholar, Professor Harold Bloom, whose words so often give one pause to think, parody engages in a strong mis-writing of a precursor-text. In Bloomian terms, the naive translator, like the weak poet, wrongly gives way to the primacy, the rootedness, the fatherhood, of his original. Though the gifted and prolific Professor Bloom never really figures out in plain language what alternative relationship the strong poet has to his source-text (it seems to be somewhere between rape, marriage, and just good friends), we may, on our part, perhaps picture to ourselves the parodist, like the strong translator, meeting on terms of equality or even superiority with a relative who is not so much a father as an infuriating younger sibling, or a beloved but eccentric bachelor uncle, or a pushy and culturally-impoverished third

cousin once removed. And, indeed, those who have been trained in one of our Ancient Universities, who have a smattering of the two old dead languages, or who can handle a dictionary, can arrive at Bloom's position etymologically, for parody, Latin *parodia*, Greek *paroidia*, holds the literal sense of singing, not after or about another song, but alongside it, in a parallel relationship, so marginalizing a text that once was central. The other text is not so much a source or an original, as an *alter-text*, a mirror-self to be rewritten.

I have been led into these thoughts by rereading the Collected Works of Charles Stuart Calverley and tend to believe that through Tytler we can for the first time begin to see Calverley's very diverse writings as a whole, to bring together his activities as parodist, light-verse writer, and translator. A younger theorist than Professor Bloom, Mr. Terence Eagleton, a member of the University of Oxford and very clever writer, has recently been upbraiding us all for our lack of theoretical clarity; it is impossible that all these reproofs should not affect me, and I shall try, in my own simple and untheoretical way, to seek out what Calverley's achievement really is, what good it can do, what is our own special need of it.

Nowadays Calverley is almost universally remembered as a parodist, and only as a parodist. In his own day, in the eighteen-sixties and seventies, there was virtual unanimity that Calverley was the greatest parodist, not only of the period or in English, but of all time. From that respectable organ *The Spectator* to that energetic representative of New Journalism, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, from the dreamy Francis Thompson to the unsleeping Professor Saintsbury, Calverley was acclaimed as "unsurpassed," "the first," "the greatest," "the best parodyist that has ever been seen." And even if we think the Cantabrigian Calverley, as his Oxonian rival Swinburne thought him, "monstrously overrated and preposterously overpraised," the unbiased and fair-minded observer must surely acknowledge Calverley's historic importance in helping young mid-Victorian readers see Victorian poetic style steadily and so see its fragmentariness. From his early burlesques in *Verses and Translations* (1862) to the masterly parodies of his *Fly Leaves* (1872), Calverley epitomizes the mid-Victorian upper-class reaction against over-curiosity of expression and irritability of fancy, and he exemplifies, too, the tendency of his generation, both in poetry and in criticism itself, to seek a new severity and purity of language.

Though the same would not be true of lesser parodists, in Calverley's case short passages, or even single lines, will serve sufficiently to demonstrate his method. Take, for example, his rendering of Matthew Arnold musing on the beadles of Burlington Arcade--

Why are ye wandering aye 'twixt porch and porch,  
Thou and thy fellow--when the pale stars fade  
At dawn,--

or take these lines from his love-poem in the style of Miss Ingelow, very  
much one of Victorian poetry's third cousins once removed--

Then we thrid God's cowslips (as erst His heather)  
That endowed the wan grass with their golden  
blooms;--

or take the single but perfect line in which he made Browning monologically  
recount opening his own front door--

I shoved the timber ope wi' my omoplat.

Take again the rather broader effect of his Pre-Raphaelite ballad, with its  
exquisite fourth line--

The auld wife sat at her ivied door  
(**Butter and eggs and a pound of cheese**)  
A thing she had frequently done before;  
And her spectacles lay on her apron'd knees,--

or take these lines from his Tupperishly prurient "Of Propriety"--

Verily, Truth is as Eve, which was ashamed of being naked;  
Wherefore doth Propriety dress her with the fair foliage  
of artifice:  
And when she is drest, behold! she knoweth not herself  
again.--

or consider, finally, his version of Tennyson, not the well-known bur-  
lesque "Wanderers," but the lines on revisiting Cambridge, when--

...the ghosts of days departed rise, and in my burning  
breast  
All the undergraduate wakens, and my spirit is at rest.  
Backward moves the kindly dial...

These few specimens I have quoted have in common this: that they are of  
the very highest parodic quality and are thoroughly penetrated with whatever  
positive power their *alter-texts* retain. They bear the mark, the accent of

those *alter-texts*, both in manner and style, so much so that my computa-  
tional colleague might confidently misattribute them to the originals. And  
this comforting conclusion would fit well enough with received opinion,  
from the respectable *Spectator* to the unsleeping Professor Saintsbury and  
beyond. By comparison with the broader burlesque-tone of earlier  
nineteenth-century parody, in for example *Rejected Addresses* or the *Bon  
Gautier Ballads*, Calverley's achievement does represent a shift to closer,  
more faithful stylistic recreation.

But it seemed to me, as I read over once again Calverley's life and  
writings, that to see Calverley as primarily a parodist is hardly to see him  
at all. Calverley is at his most distinctive and most creative, not in his  
parodies or even in his light verse, but in his translations. And it occurred  
to me also, fresh as I was from Tytler's *Essay*, how much that we all value  
in the parodies themselves partakes of the character of translation.

Until comparatively recent years, translation as practised in our great  
Public Schools and Ancient Universities was a branch, not of reading, but  
of writing. As that always brilliant writer, the polylingual Professor Steiner,  
shows, neoclassical translation theory had long tried to steer a *via media*  
between the Scylla of literalism and the Charybdis of unfettered paraphrase.  
The nineteenth century reopened the question, with a renewed debate about  
the strategy of translation. On the one hand, German scholars, under the  
banner-cry of "*facsimile translation*," were pressing for a new fidelity,  
where the translator would attempt to reproduce, not just the meaning and  
style, but even the idiom and metrical form of the original. As one classicist  
of great ability and genuine learning, Professor Francis Newman of Univer-  
sity College, London, put it, the translator should "retain every peculiari-  
ty of the original, so far as he is able, with the greater care the more foreign  
it may happen to be," and Victorians as diverse as the scientist Whewell,  
the poet laureate Tennyson, the civil servant Clough, and the politician  
Gladstone, all tried their hands at *facsimile translation* or the reproduction  
of classical metres in English. From this German movement sprang the pro-  
tracted mid-century debate over the propriety of English hexameters in  
translating the classics, and even those English scholars who were unwilling  
to surrender their national metres were nonetheless affected by the  
underlying argument of the German school, that only through the recrea-  
tion of a poet's linguistic individuality could his poetry be known, however  
un-English or even unpoetic that individuality might seem. And here I think  
I see the theorists waiting for me with a hungry joy in their eyes. But I shall  
elude them.

For the older neoclassical view still retained its educational status, and  
increasingly from the eighteen-fifties onwards it was a refinement of this  
older view, "translation into analogous form," that won out among both  
readers and reviewers. Professor Blackie of Edinburgh, the translator of

Aeschylus, was surely right when he objected that "the German idea of a *facsimile* translation" posed "an impossible problem"; "it is," wrote Blackie, "as if a man should be required to make a counterpart to a silk vesture with cotton twist, or to copy a glowing Venus of Titian in chalk." And we find, too, this objection anticipated by the venerable Tytler, when after propounding in his fifth chapter the Second General Rule of Translation, that "The Style and Manner of Writing in a Translation should be of the same Character with that of the original" (112), he has in his seventh chapter to admit the limitation that such stylistic assimilation "must be regulated by the (differing) nature and genius of the languages of the original and the translation" and that many aspects of Latin cannot be successfully imitated in English (168-169). Most Victorians came to agree with Blackie and Tytler, and the very best of them seem to have recognized that the intertextual analogies they thus chose or created were not merely recognitions of kinship, but interpretations, even rereadings. Since Victorian schoolboys and Victorian scholars were doing sheaves of these analogous translations every year, and whatever anyone attempted had probably been tried before, the whole endeavour was intrinsically playful or ludic.

Calverley, like the vast majority of educated, poetry-writing Englishmen but more so, had been trained at two of our great Public Schools and at both of our Ancient Universities, and he had been trained there to compose verse in Latin and Greek, verse recognizably Homeric or Theocritean or Horatian. His Cambridge tutor, the Reverend Mr. Gunson, once remarked that he really preferred Calverley's Latin verse to Horace's. "His Latin was as good as Horace's, and he had a peculiar feeling and beauty of style which Horace did not possess." Calverley remains, as far as I know, the only man ever to win the annual prize for an original Latin poem at both Oxford and Cambridge, and his Cambridge poem, on the set topic "Australia," illustrates the interlingual problems he faced, for he had to find a Latin equivalent for the convict colony at Botany Bay, and rendered it *Lugens Sinus*, the mourning bay, the bay of lamentation, echoing *lugentes campi*, Virgil's phrase for the mourning fields, the underworld, doubly appropriate to a convict settlement down under.

Calverley had been trained not only in composition, but in translation from verse into verse, choosing for his own version an English style and metre (or a classical style and metre when translating from English) analogous rather than identical to the original, analogous, that is, in feeling and cultural significance. For example, he translated Robert Burns's Scotch song "John Anderson, My Jo" into the other Doric of ancient Greece, while he translated the Idylls of Theocritus into Spenserian pastoral. In three articles on translation that he contributed in the eighteen-sixties to the *London Student*, Calverley carefully rejected the modern experiments in metrical *facsimile*; instead, he praised Professor Conington's decision to

render the *Aeneid*, not in hexameter, but into a mixture of Milton and Sir Walter Scott, and he warmly commended a project that would now seem willfully eccentric, the *Horae Tennysonianae*, a collection of translations from Tennyson into Latin verse. His own practice in translation, as he states it in his 1866 preface, was similarly appropriative; he never took a phrase from a previous translator, but he seized, as he says, "without scruple," upon any expression from an original English poet that seemed to him a useful equivalent of the Greek or Latin. He did this borrowing without quotation marks or any formal acknowledgment because he simply assumed readers would all recognize the source or echo in each phrase.

The result, of course, was poetry that was halfway to stylistic parody, and that shares something of its critical duality. Take for example Calverley's rendering of Horace's well-known ode, the opening ode from the third book, the plea for rural contentment that begins *Odi profanum vulgus et arceo; favete linguis*—"I hate the vulgar crowd and keep them far distant"—, where Calverley rewrites the original alcaics into the metre of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*:

He who but asks 'Enough' defies  
 Wild waves to rob him of his ease;  
 He fears no rude shocks, when he sees  
 Arcturus set or Haedus rise; ...

Why should I rear me halls of rare  
 Design, on proud shafts mounting high?  
 Why bid my Sabine vale good-bye  
 For doubled wealth and doubled care?

It's a commonplace that all translators unconsciously work within the poetics of their age, but this passage has a double interest, both in the skill with which it knowingly rewrites Horace as Tennysonian, and also in suggesting indirectly an Horatian, reclusive, ironic Tennyson. And it offers an extra touch, too, in mistranslating, in appropriating to the Tennysonian voice that sentimental middle-brow Dickensian phrase about the "wild waves," when the Latin is, more or less, "tumultuous sea." Is Horace, is Tennyson, perhaps more middlebrow, smuggler, in praising the countryside than we had thought? As after reading a good parody, so after reading Calverley's analogous translation, one can never quite read the Somersby sections of *In Memoriam* the same way again.

This kind of translational verve lies at the very heart of Calverley's writing. Even in his long religious years of illness, after *Fly Leaves*, the so-called "ten years silence," when all he wrote were hymns on commission, the hymns he wrote were translations, from Latin into English for *The Hym-*

nary and, surprisingly, from English into Latin for the better-known collection *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. Indeed, a pair of lines from his translation of a Whitsuntide hymn by "King Robert of France, or St. Notker" probably expresses his parodic philosophy, and the hope of all serious parodists, better than anything else:

Lord, thou makest tongues of Babel one in worship and  
in speech:  
Truth to them who bowed to idols, mighty Master, Thou  
dost teach.

At a time when the Reverend Mr. Robertson is running for President, and the Reverend Mr. Falwell is founding a university by getting it a nationally-ranked football team, we hardly need to be reminded that the strongest part of religion today is its unconscious parody. Victorian hymn-writing, too, has often seemed to me intrinsically parodic, in its constant, slightly off-key, struggle with the borrowed style of the Authorized or King James version, and in the consequent comic effect when the hymn-writer loses his verbal grip, yet few people manage to see this parodic tendency as positive. Even in his hymns, however, Calverley managed to turn his gifts to account. He translated "Awake my soul," for instance, into the Latin *Rumpe moras*, literally "break the delays," and *Rumpe moras* is misappropriated from Virgil's phrase for Aeneas, as Troy falls to the Greeks. The last piece he ever wrote was a translation of the doomsday hymn, *De Die Judicii*, by Thomasius; Thomasius's Latin original had been contrived so that each pair of lines began in order with each letter of the Latin alphabet, and this trick Calverley reproduced in English, right down to reproducing Thomasius's makeshift line for X, beginning "Xt the King," leaving a curiously threatening gap in the text for the bland reader, or perhaps, rather, in Cantabrigian mathematical terms, reducing Christ the King to an unknown quantity.

For Calverley, then, parody and the parodic were not merely collegiate burlesque, as Swinburne claimed, nor even a complicated and skillful form for literary criticism; they were a way of thought, a way of reading through rewriting, that appropriated and misappropriated texts and fragments of text from all over the classical and contemporary literary traditions. Mr. Eagleton and the young lions of the *New Left Review* will have their ideological suspicions about a writer who, while India mutinied and Prussia invaded France, and while the British populace stormed the railings of Hyde Park, sat in his study and handed round to upper-class barbarians the pouncet-box of the classical tradition. But the effect of Calverley's misappropriation was unsettling rather than merely anaesthetic. A college acquaintance of his, a rather dim Scotsman, once complained bitterly that Calverley "disillusionated" everything, and one is delighted to find that Calverley

took the comment as a compliment. Calverley was something more than the artful master of a small band of self-congratulatory Cambridge wits, and we ought not to rest satisfied until he and the other parodists are seen to be what they are, one of the chief glories of Victorian literature.

The centrality of the parodic is not therefore a brand-new modernist discovery. Victorian appropriative parody, the parody of strong mistranslation or transcontextualized misquotation, anticipates much that is most characteristic in modern literary discussion. Currency and supremacy are insured to parody, not indeed often or always by the world's deliberate and conscious choice, but by something far deeper--by our instinctual mistranslation, our deliberate misunderstanding, of whatever seems inadequate or oppressive. The future of parody is immense; more and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to parody to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. The promised land of parodic liberation it may not be ours to enter; but to have desired to enter it, to have saluted it from afar, is already, perhaps, as it was for Calverley, the best distinction for many of our contemporaries.

#### A Bibliographical Afterword

Perhaps I need to record that I did not make up Alexander Tytler, a late 18th century Scottish lawyer who was Professor of Universal History at Edinburgh and a Scottish judge (as Lord Woodhouselee); his *Essay on the Principles of Translation*, first published in 1791, was issued in Everyman's Library in 1907 (though my page references are to the second edition, 1797). The "American professor" is made up, though not by me; in David Lodge's *Small World* (1984), he sports a button reading "Every decoding is another encoding." The Bloom reference is to his earlier books, *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and *A Map of Misreading* (1974), while the Eagleton reference is to his *Literary Theory, an Introduction* (1983).

On Calverley himself, the best modern studies are by Hilda Spear, in her edition of *The English Poems of Charles Stuart Calverley* (1974, from which I quote the parodies), and Max H. Massey, in his unpublished dissertation (University of California, Davis, 1973, from which I excerpted contemporary comment); see also my essay in *Victorian Poets after 1850*, ed. W.E. Fredeman and Ira Bruce Nadel (1985).

The material on nineteenth-century translation theory came from my work on Clough's *The Bothie* (University of Queensland Press, 1976), from Matthew Arnold's *On Translating Homer*, and from George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (1975), though see also two collections of essays, one edited by Reuben Brower, *On Translation* (1959, especially essays by W.V. Quine and Roman Jakobson), and the other edited by Arrowsmith and Shattuck, *The Craft and Context of Translation* (1961).

Calverley's own essays on translation were reprinted in his **Literary Remains** (1885); his translations and hymns appeared in various volumes in the 1860s and 1870s, but I quote from the **Complete Works** (1904). The Scotsman who complained about disillusionation was Frederick Arnold, in "Some Recollections of Charles Stuart Calverley," **Temple Bar**, 79 (January 1887).

My debts to Matthew Arnold are more diffuse; this is not, except in the odd sentences, strictly a parody, but something between pastiche and burlesque. The opening comes from his preface to **Culture and Anarchy**, and there are large borrowings also from "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" and "The Study of Poetry." The phrase about "cartloads of rubbish" is, of course, Arnold's not mine; books on parody from which I have drawn include George Kitchin, **A Survey of Parody and Burlesque** (1931); J.D. Jump, **Burlesque** (1972); Magaret Rose, **Parody/Metafiction** (1979); and Linda Hutcheon, **A Theory of Parody** (1985). The ideas in my conclusion about the cultural centrality of parody are those of Rose and Hutcheon, though the words are largely Arnold's.