A Homeric valediction

CROSSING THE WINE-DARK SEA: JOURNEYS THROUGH ANCIENT LITERATURE
By Emily Wilson,
Hachette, ₹499

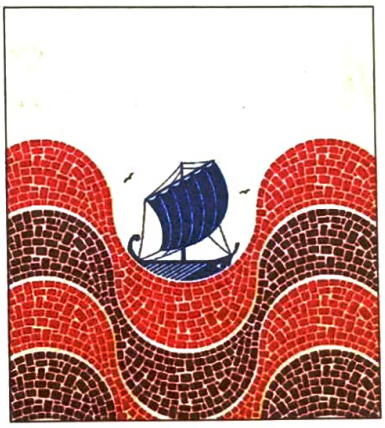
There is, admittedly, something self-defeating about reviewing a book on the impossibility of perfect translation: you are translating the author translating, and something inevitably curdles in the retelling, the way a joke dies the third time it's explained. Emily Wilson would likely find this funny rather than troubling; if anything, it is exactly the kind of recursive bind, a *mise en abyme* of interpretive labour, that her book explores. Celebrated for her translations of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, Wilson seems acutely aware of this predicament and it is precisely this self-awareness, wry and understated, that confers upon her new essay collection its *élan*.

The collection comprises thirteen chapters across roughly three hundred pages. Such succinctness is well-matched with Wilson's essayistic sensibility, which is notably aphoristic. She is wary of pinning an idea down too firmly, preferring to leave doors ajar.

It is worth pausing, too, on the book cover, which mounts its own paratext; a ship (recognisably Odysseus's) rendered as an ultramarine-blue silhouette rides a sea washed in deep maroon, a fairly literal *mise-en-scène* of the title's Homeric epithet, *oinops pontos*, the wine-dark sea, whose exact hue classicists have disputed for over a century.

There is a pervasive paganism to the collection. The book is steeped, squarely and unapologetically, in the old gods and every page is imbued with some residue of incense and olive oil, of blood poured out on stone altars to appease something that perhaps no longer, quite exists. As Wilson puts it, "The dead are dead, and yet some of their words remain."

If Athena is grey-eyed and dawn is rosy-fingered, Wilson is quick-tongued. Her ambition, once you notice it, is almost wilful for someone



this fluent. She writes, "I hoped to create certain alien features of the original that aren't reflected in most modern translations." She is not smoothing Homer into English. She is letting the Greek snag (deliberately so), against the English, so the reader feels the pull of a language that baulks at dissolving fully.

Most translations aim for invisibility. Wilson's translation aims instead for a kind of visible friction: Greek showing through English, the way a scar shows through skin that has otherwise healed. She hedges even her own hedging, insisting that "literary translation is never reducible to maxims", as if pre-empting those readers who might mistake her twenty rules in the Afterword for a codified poetics.

In the final chapter, "Translating the *Odyssey*", the book reaches its denouement. Everything it has spent two hundred and fifty pages skirting lands here, in a single denuded sentence. Wilson writes, "If I live another twenty years, and retain the capacity to read, and if the world is still habitable by humans, I hope to see younger people come up with much better solutions than mine." It is, in the end, a strangely Homeric valediction from a Homeric translator: like a torch passed hand to hand down a darkening shoreline, each runner trusting the flame to a stranger they will never see arrive.

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