

Milton's Elegy on the Death of Lancelot Andrewes: Cowper's Translation

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John Milton's Latin poems are largely the product of his earlier years. The most substantial of them, 'Epitaphium Damonis', is a lament for his school-friend, Charles Diodati, of whose death Milton heard while in Italy in 1639. Milton here employs pastoral elegy, a form which he had earlier (1637) adopted for his English poem, 'Lycidas'. 'Thyrsis' laments the untimely death of his fellow-shepherd, 'Damon', seized from him prematurely ('praereptum', l. 7), as Milton had mourned for Edward King, 'dead ere his prime' (l. 8), in the guise of a fellow shepherd, 'Lycidas'. To a twenty-first-century reader it may appear odd that Milton was happy to write in English about the death of a recent colleague – perhaps a friend – at Christ's College, Cambridge, whereas he reverted to Latin as the medium to mourn a long-standing and closer friend, whom he had met at St Paul's School in 1620. 'Lycidas' was written as a contribution to a volume of memorial verses for King, published in 1638, which contains Greek and Latin poems as well as English, so presumably Milton could have taken the classical route had he wished. For seventeenth- and eighteenth-century scholars, writing in Latin was a major part of their training and so came readily enough. It may be significant that, whereas King is not referred to by his real name in 'Lycidas', Milton breaks through the fiction at the end of 'Epitaphium Damonis' by juxtaposing Damon, his friend's pastoral name, with his actual and divine name, Diodati, meaning 'God-given'. Is this gesture the English poet bidding farewell to his classical youth and aiming his future career in the direction of Judaeo-Christian theology (rather than Greek and Roman mythology) and the language of contemporary England? From 1639 on, English would be, with one or two exceptions, Milton's medium.

Such a conclusion, if warranted, should nevertheless not obscure Milton's achievements in Latin verse. He himself clearly wanted his Latin poems to find a reading public. When his first volume of poems was published in 1645 (*Comus*, his masque acted at Ludlow Castle, had been published in 1637, but without Milton's name), the title proudly declared the contents as *Poems of Mr. John Milton, both English and Latin*. Good and sober judges have commented on the Latin poems with approval. Even Samuel Johnson, not a natural admirer of Milton, described them as 'lusciously elegant'. Johnson's adverb is perhaps open to more than one interpretation, but his adjective appears to be positively laudatory, particularly from a critic who goes on to detect in Milton's early English poems a 'repulsive harshness' and a quality of laboriousness in both versification and diction. By contrast, the Latin poems, Johnson says, have a 'purity of diction' and 'harmony of the numbers'. They may be essentially imitative of the ancients, but that imitation is 'exquisite'.¹ Later in the eighteenth century, William Hayley's *Life of Milton*, one of whose consistent themes is that Johnson's disapproval, or qualified praise, of Milton was a result of political and personal animosity, is more effusive. The Latin poems, he declares, 'exhibit lively proofs, that he possessed both tenderness and enthusiasm, those primary constituents of a poet, at an early period of life, and in the highest degree'.² Johnson, more guarded and discriminating than the generous Hayley, remarks that the quality of Milton's Latin poems is mixed. He observes – with admirable restraint and understatement – that some of Milton's 'exercises' on the Gunpowder Plot 'might have been spared', and notes that 'the elegies excel the odes'.³ It is, indeed, in his seven elegiac poems that the finest of Milton's Latin poetry is to be found.

The term 'elegiac' may be misleading for a modern reader. We have come to associate 'elegy' exclusively with mourning or commemorative poetry, whereas the classical elegy signified any poem written in elegiac metre. As devised or formalised by the seventh-century BC Greek poet Archilochus, elegiac metre consists of a dactylic hexameter followed by a

dactylic pentameter – that is, six feet mainly of one heavy and two light syllables followed by five similar feet.⁴ Particularly as developed in Latin verse, these two lines came to form a couplet, equating with one complete sentence, or substantial and integral section of a sentence, which is the convention adopted in Milton's elegiacs. Poems in this metre covered various subjects, including mortality, but also love and public topics such as warfare. Three of Milton's elegies are verse epistles, two to Charles Diodati and one to Milton's private tutor, Thomas Young. Of the remainder, one is on love, and one celebrates the return of spring. The other two are elegies in the modern sense: a short poem on the death of Richard Ridding, the University of Cambridge beadle, and an appropriately more substantial poem on a more substantial figure, Lancelot Andrewes.

John Milton's Elegy III: On the Death of the Bishop of Winchester

Lancelot Andrewes was one of the most influential and significant English theologians of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods.⁵ Born in 1555, he obtained in 1588 the living of St Giles Cripplegate in the City of London, was a chaplain to Queen Elizabeth in the 1590s and became Dean of Westminster in 1601. James I appointed him to the see of Chichester in 1605, then to that of Ely in 1609, and, finally, that of Winchester in 1618. His career was extraordinarily successful despite relatively humble origins. His scholarship, preaching, administrative and educational expertise all attracted significant praise from diverse of his contemporaries, all the more remarkable given the inescapably treacherous theological waters that any outstanding personality had to navigate during this time. Posthumously, however, he became a more controversial and divisive figure, largely as a result of his adoption by the Laudian faction who, by controlling the publication of his works, appear to have steered his reputation towards a high Eucharistic theology which may, or may not, have been at the core of his true beliefs. His later reputation derives from the power and liturgical tenor of his sermons, which attracted the admiring attention of the nineteenth-century Tractarian movement and of twentieth-century literary figures – notably T. S. Eliot, whose 1926 essay claimed for him 'a place second to none in the history of the formation of the English Church'.⁶

It may, then, appear odd that the John Milton, whose mature political and theological opinions were very different, should write an elegy for him. Indeed, later, in 1642, Milton wrote in his *Reason of Church-Government* a refutation of Andrewes' defence of episcopacy. However, Milton's criticism of Andrewes in *The Reason of Church-Government* is quite mild in tone, at least by the standards of regular controversial writings. Milton's pamphlet is a riposte to *Certain Brief Treatises* (1641), a compilation of tracts by eight authors, six of whom (including Andrewes) were dead. Milton specifically picks up a phrase on its title page, 'Out of the rude draughts of Lancelot Andrewes, late Bishop of Winchester', to question how 'his friends' should have allowed such 'rude draughts' to be published in the name of a man 'so much bruted for learning'; and also states that the arguments for church government by bishops on the basis of the reign of Aaron and his sons in the Old Testament is put as well as it can be by Andrewes (and James Ussher), who 'for their learning are reputed the best able to say what may be said in this opinion'. Milton is clear enough in his rejection of these arguments and dismisses Andrewes' 'shallow reasonings', but comes close to saying that contemporary writers are misusing what are merely rough drafts in the work of a man of true learning and ability.⁷ Also, in 1626, the year of Andrewes' death, Milton was still a very young man of seventeen, albeit a precociously gifted and assiduous scholar. In the 1645 volume, Milton's elegy is scrupulously headed 'Anno aetatis 17', a perhaps deliberate distancing of the poem from his mature position. Of more immediate relevance to the young scholar is likely to have been Andrewes' status as a fellow Cambridge man. Andrewes won a

scholarship to Pembroke College in 1571, where his reputation as – in the words of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* – ‘a precocious, even compulsive, scholar’ invites comparison with that of Milton himself. These early elegiacs of Milton naturally reflect his university experience and affiliations. ‘Lycidas’, his first substantial English poem outside the anonymous *Comus*, was, as we noted earlier, part of a volume of memorial verses published by Cambridge associates of its subject, Edward King.

In any case, Milton’s elegy does not tread on any remotely controversial ground beyond an acknowledgement of Andrewes’ status as ‘praesul Wintoniensis’ (bishop of Winchester)⁸, whose head, as he appears to the poet, is encircled by ‘Infula ... alba’ (l. 56): a ‘white band or fillet’ worn on the forehead to signify religious office, and so a reasonable equivalent of a bishop’s mitre. Milton’s poem is in the traditional form of a dream vision, in which the poet’s sorrow is lifted by his subject’s radiant appearance and assumption into heaven. The poem is remarkable not for any theological ideas but for its fusion of elegy in the modern sense with decorative mythology, rich natural description and that ultimate ecstatic vision.⁹

Milton opens the poem in desolate mood:

Moestus eram, et tacitus nullo comitante sedebam¹⁰

[I was sad, and sat silent with no companion]

His grief has more than one contemporary cause: the dreadful carnage wrought by the plague that struck London in 1625 and the deaths of Protestant generals in the Thirty Years War then devastating mainland Europe. However, even these give way to the principal cause of his grief, the death of Andrewes:

At te praecipue luxi dignissime praesul,

Wintoniaequae olim gloria magna tuae (ll. 13-14)

[But chiefly I mourned for you, worthiest bishop,
once the great glory of your Winchester]

The poet’s voice then breaks out in a lament, addressing cruel Death (‘Mors fera’) as a deity second in power only to Jove himself. Is it not enough, he complains, that Death should destroy the flowers of nature – the lily, the crocus and the rose sacred to Venus? That she should ravage the mighty oak? That she should wreak havoc with the birds of the air, the beasts of the forests and the creatures of the sea? Why, when she has such power over creation, does she even insist on destroying human kind:

Quid iuvat humana tingere caede manus? (l. 28)

[What pleasure does it give to stain your hand with human blood?]

At this halfway point in the poem, Milton breaks off his lament to remark that Hesperus, the evening-star, has risen and Phoebus, the sun, has completed his journey across the sky and has sunk his chariot beneath the western sea. The shades of night bring sleep to close the poet’s weeping eyes; but also, as the poem moves into its second stage, to transform darkness into light. He dreams that he is walking across a wide plain:

Illis punicea radiabant omnia luce,

Ut matutino cum iuga sole rubent. (ll. 39-40)

[There everything glowed with a rosy light, as mountain tops redden with the morning sun]

Nature, darkened by the goddess Mors in the poet's earlier lament, is now, in his dream, re-vivified: the ground is covered with multi-coloured flowers, more varied even than in the famed gardens of Alcinous (the wondrous gardens of the King of the Phaeacians, described in book seven of Homer's *Odyssey*, where trees bore fruit and flowers throughout the year) as adorned by Chloris, the Greek goddess of flowers, equivalent of Roman Flora; streams flow; a gentle western breeze wafts the scents of roses. In the midst of such richness, the poet is suddenly aware of a human figure:

Ecce mihi subito praesul Wintonius astat (l. 53)

[Behold, the bishop of Winchester is suddenly standing by me]

His figure reflects the magical light of the scene:

Sydereum nitido fulsit in ore iubar;

Vestis ad auratos defluxit candida talos,

Infula divinum cinxerat alba caput. (ll. 54-6)

[A star-like radiance shone in his bright countenance; a white robe flowed down to his golden feet, a white fillet circled his god-like head.]

Light irradiates the lines as it does the figure of Andrewes, variegated with a neatness and economy unavailable to English by the distinction between 'candidus', a gleaming white (opposite to 'niger', a glistening black), and 'albus', a dead white (opposite to 'ater', a dull black); by the graded succession of adjective, verb and noun in 'nitido fulsit ... iubar' ('shining shone the shine' would be a reductive English version); and by the metaphor in 'sidereum' ('of a star or stars').

The poet's vision becomes transcendent as the flower-bedecked earth resounds to heavenly notes, which emanate from celestial forms welcoming Andrewes into eternal happiness. At this climax of the poem's transformation from darkness and sadness into light and joy, the dream dissolves as night ends, and the poet awakens. The poem's final lines lament the ending of sleep and express a wish for more such dreams:

Flebam turbatos Cephaleia pellice somnos,

Talia contingant somnia saepe mihi. (ll. 67-8)

[I wept for the sleep that had been disturbed by Cephalus' mistress. May such dreams often happen to me.]

Milton ends by playing on a paradox. Dawn (Cephalus' mistress is Aurora, whose love for him is told in the seventh book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) turns darkness into light, but also drives out the poet's radiant vision and its 'aurea ... quies' ('golden repose'). Andrewes has been received into heaven, but the poet awakes to tears: a momentary sight of paradisaical bliss has been lost to him.

Cowper's translations of Milton

Cowper's translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* was published in July 1791. He had begun it back in 1784. A lot had happened since: his and Mrs Unwin's removal to Weston, the sudden death of William Unwin, Cowper's breakdown of 1787, and his friendship with young John Johnson. During this time, apart from the six months of his illness, regular work on Homer provided continuity and stability. What would now fill the gap? Cowper told Johnny Johnson that 'Many different plans and projects are recommended to me. Some call aloud for original verse, others for more translation, and others for other things.'¹¹ Cowper's publisher, Joseph Johnson, took the decisive step by inviting him to prepare and annotate an edition of the works of Milton, the intention being to produce a Milton Gallery to rival Boydell's celebrated Shakespeare Gallery. Cowper was keen to tell correspondents about this new venture. He wrote to Walter Bagot, his friend from Westminster days and holder of livings in Staffordshire, with some pride:

I am on the brink of a new literary engagement, and of a kind with which I never meddled before. A magnificent edition of Milton's works (I mean his poetical ones) is about to be published in the Boydel stile, with notes; Fuseli, the Painter, and your humble servant, the Editor. Thus I shall have pass'd through the three gradations of authorship, Poet, Translator, and Critic.¹²

Eight days later he told Samuel Rose that 'I have been called to a new literary engagement, and ... I have not refused it'.¹³

Among those calling aloud for original verse was Cowper's admirer James Hurdis, whose *The Village Curate* (1788) had been written very much in Cowper's manner. Cowper and Hurdis had exchanged views on the latter's works, after Joseph Johnson had asked Cowper for his opinion of Hurdis's *Adriano*, and on poetry in general. Hurdis sent Cowper detailed comments on the Homer translation. Cowper politely acknowledged Hurdis's wish that Cowper would write more poems, but still stoutly defended his new project:

I am obliged to you for wishing that I were employed in some original work rather than in translation. To tell you the truth, I am of your mind; and unless I could find another Homer, I shall promise (I believe) and vow, when I have done with Milton, never to translate again. But my veneration for our great countryman is equal to what I feel for the Grecian; and consequently I am happy, and feel myself honourably employed whatever I do for Milton.¹⁴

Now it is true that Cowper's enthusiasm for the task of an editor seems to have palled quite quickly. A year after this letter to Hurdis, Cowper confessed to his new friend William Hayley: 'How often do I wish in the course of every day that I could be employed once more in poetry, and how often, of course, that this Miltonic trap had never caught me!'¹⁵ And another year on, when he heard from Johnson that the project had been shelved, he wrote that 'It is a great relief to me that my Miltonic labours are suspended'.¹⁶ Cowper had got no further with his annotation than part way through the third book of *Paradise Lost*. Perhaps, with the prospect of another nine books, not to mention all the other poems, Cowper might have begun to have some sympathy with Samuel Johnson (despite his frequent exasperation with the older critic) when he wrote of *Paradise Lost* that no-one 'ever wished it longer than it is'.¹⁷

However, it is significant that, in his letter to Hurdis quoted above, Cowper specifically refers to translation rather than editing, and that he began his work by producing English versions of Milton's Latin poems. This task would have been a natural and agreeable continuation of the Homer. As early as October 1791 he told Samuel Rose that he had 'just finish'd his [Milton's] 7 elegies'; then in November confirmed, in a letter to Joseph Hill, his friend from

Inner Temple days, that he had ‘made a considerable progress in the translation of Milton’s Latin poetry’.¹⁸ By February 1792 he could tell James Hurdis that he had completed the Latin translations. In this letter he specifically says that ‘To the labours of versifying I have no objection, but to the labours of criticism I am new, and apprehend that I shall find them wearisome.’¹⁹ He may have simply wanted to defer again to Hurdis’s concerns; but it is perhaps more likely that realisation of the size of the editorial task he had taken on had quenched his initial enthusiasm.

It soon emerged that there was another Milton venture afoot. Boydell, inspired by the success of his Shakespeare Gallery, also had the idea of an illustrated edition of Milton. He engaged as his artist the portrait painter George Romney, and employed William Hayley, by then an experienced poet, to write a biography of Milton. In the event, neither scheme was brought to complete fruition. Hayley, good professional writer as he was, duly completed his biography, which Boydell published in 1794 with plates, though only one by Romney. Meanwhile, the projects had been the means of securing a friendship between Cowper and Hayley. Hearing of Cowper’s planned edition, Hayley wrote to him – his letter containing an adulatory sonnet to the older poet – to express his concern that they should not be seen as rivals. Cowper responded in kind, and invited Hayley to visit him in Weston. Hayley did so, and returned the invitation, prompting Cowper’s final journey before his retreat to Norfolk. It was at Eartham in Sussex, Hayley’s home, that Cowper met Romney, who sketched the best known of the portraits of him. He and Hayley got on very well; so much so that the two truncated projects came together. When Hayley published his life of Milton, he included extensive excerpts from Cowper’s translation of Milton’s Latin poems. Then, after Cowper’s death, it was Hayley who produced in 1808 a full edition of Cowper’s translations of Milton’s Latin and Italian poems, a testimony to one writer’s belief in the value of another.

For, whatever the eventual outcome of the planned Milton edition, it is clear that Cowper took his translations very seriously. He told Samuel Rose that he thought particularly highly of Milton’s seven Latin elegies:

The versification of them is I think equal to the best of Ovid, but the matter of them is almost too puerile for me, who if I wore any beard at all should now wear a grey one.²⁰

A modern reader may easily misread this. Cowper does not mean that the subject-matter of Milton’s elegies is ‘puerile’ in the sense of ‘childish, immature’. He is, rather, making a joke at his own expense. Cowper is an old man (well, he was all of sixty), and Milton wrote his elegies when he was still in his teens, a student at Cambridge. The poems are, therefore, too ‘youthful, juvenile’ for such as him to appreciate properly. These are no poems for old men. This definitional meaning of ‘puerile’ has now been displaced by the depreciatory sense, but was very much current in the 1790s. Indeed, the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites a line from Cowper’s *Tirocinium* to illustrate this meaning.²¹ A fortnight later Cowper told Joseph Hill of his high estimation of Milton’s Latin poems:

I give them, as opportunity offers, all the variety of measure that I can. Some I render in heroic rhyme, some in stanzas, some in seven, and some in eight syllable measure, and some in blank verse. They will all together I hope make an agreeable miscellany for the English reader. They are certainly good in themselves, and cannot fail to please but by the fault of their translator.²²

These are not the words of a writer reluctantly undertaking an onerous task. Cowper was making rapid progress, and was also thinking carefully about how to present his translations as a package to interest a reader.

He had long thought deeply about verse translation. While engaged on the Homer project, he wrote a letter to the *Gentleman's Magazine* under the pseudonym of 'Alethes' (meaning, in Greek, the 'truthful one'), and supplied a detailed preface for the first edition in 1791.²³ Cowper's primary concerns were to distance himself from Alexander Pope's Homer translation, which had been widely and rightly celebrated as a major achievement, and to justify his adoption of blank verse as distinct from Pope's pentameter couplets. His principal objections to the use of couplets are that, however fine a poet is doing the translating, 'No human ingenuity can be equal to the task of closing every couplet with sounds homotonous, expressing at the same time the full sense, and only the full sense of his original', and that rhyme 'admits not of sufficient variety in the pause and cadence'.²⁴ To translate Homer in rhyming couplets, then, is to bind oneself to a form that is inevitably going to result in too free a translation, and will eventually prove tiresome to the ear. In the 'Alethes' letter, Cowper writes of Pope's rhymes as 'chains' which produce many a 'violation of Homer's sense'; in the preface he switches from 'chains' to 'fetters', making the same point while declaring himself 'among the warmest admirers of Mr. Pope as an original writer' and allowing Pope 'all the merit he can justly claim' as translator of Homer.²⁵

Why, then, did Cowper, as he told Joseph Hill, cheerfully use a variety of metres, including 'heroic rhyme' (that is, rhymed pentameters) for his Milton translations? First, Cowper's objection to the use of rhyme for translating Homer derives from the length of the poems. Milton's Latin poems are all, of course, much shorter than Homer's epics. Further, Milton's elegies, as we have seen, are not written purely in heroic hexameters, but in the couplets (albeit unrhymed) of elegiac metre. They therefore invite a skilled writer to use an English form that is as pointed as the original while not excessively straining against the limited variety of cadence in any one form. Such a translator can thereby realistically aspire to what Cowper defines, in the Homer preface, as an ideal translation: one 'which partakes equally of fidelity and liberality, that is close, but not so close as to be servile, free, but not so free as to be licentious'.²⁶

Cowper's translation of Milton's third elegy

Cowper seems to have taken particular care with his version of Milton's elegy on Lancelot Andrewes. He was puzzled by those references Milton makes to the deaths of generals in the Thirty Years War near the beginning of the poem. Milton's lines are indeed very vague here: he writes only of a famous leader and his respected brother ('clarique ducis, fratrisque verendi') and heroes ('heroum') and leaders mourned by Belgia ('Flevit et amissos Belgia tota duces'). A mere translator would not need to know any more. But Cowper was intrigued enough to want to know who they were. He wrote to Walter Bagot asking if he knew or could look up Thomas Warton's edition of Milton's poems, the second edition of which had recently been published.²⁷ In the event, Cowper decided to keep his translation faithful to Milton's obscurity.

He did, however, soon get to see a copy of Warton's edition, for he wrote again to Bagot a month later taking issue with Warton's comments on Milton's decision to write an elegy on the death of Andrewes. Warton was very forthright, asserting that Milton must have come to regret deeply his praise for a bishop who defended royal prerogative and the authority of the Church of England. Cowper leapt to the defence of both Andrewes and Milton:

Milton's mind could not be narrow'd by any thing, and though he quarrell'd with Episcopacy in the Church of England idea of it, I am persuaded that a good Bishop, as well as any other good man of whatsoever rank or order, had always a share of his veneration.²⁸

Cowper, we know, was in every way an admirer of Milton²⁹; but it is instructive to find Cowper both asserting Milton's capacity for open-mindedness towards a dignitary of the Church of England and showing it himself. It may be taking a translation carried out as part of a commissioned publishing venture too far to claim it as an act of solidarity with its subject; but Cowper nonetheless was clearly committed to more than a simply routine approach to his work.

It is not surprising that Cowper's translations have been largely ignored by later critics and commentators. Rather like James Hurdis wishing that Cowper would write more original poems, instead of spending his time on second-hand material, no doubt most admirers of Cowper would prefer to have more of Cowper himself than products of a scholarly enterprise, particularly one that remained so radically incomplete. Even the sympathetic James King is relatively cool: 'If the Miltonic translations do not constitute a considerable body of work, they have the merit of being elegant renditions of the originals.'³⁰ However, I believe that Cowper's version of the Andrewes elegy is one of his finest translations, and deserves a similar degree of sympathetic and committed interest to that shown by the poet himself towards his subject. Here is the complete poem:

Silent I sat, dejected, and alone,
Making, in thought, the public woes my own,
When, first, arose the image in my breast
Of England's sufferings by that scourge, the Pest!
How death, his fun'ral torch and scythe in hand,
Entering the lordliest mansions of the land,
Has laid the gem-illumin'd palace low,
And levell'd tribes of nobles, at a blow.
I, next, deplor'd the fam'd fraternal pair,
Too soon to ashes turn'd, and empty air!
The heroes next, whom snatch'd into the skies,
All Belgia saw, and follow'd with her sighs,
But thee far most I mourn'd, regretted most,
Winton's chief shepherd, and her worthiest boast!
Pour'd out in tears I thus complaining said:
'Death, next in pow'r to him, who rules the dead!

Is't not enough that all the woodlands yield
To thy fell force, and ev'ry verdant field;
That lilies, at one noisome blast of thine,
And ev'n the Cyprian queen's own roses, pine; 20
That oaks themselves, although the running rill
Suckle their roots, must wither at thy will;
That all the winged nations, even those,
Whose heav'n-directed flight the future shows,
And all the beasts, that in dark forests stray,
And all the herds of Proteus are thy prey.
Ah envious! arm'd with pow'rs so unconfin'd!
Why stain thy hands with blood of human kind?
Why take delight, with darts, that never roam,
To chase a heav'n-born spirit from her home?' 30
While thus I mourn'd, the star of evening stood,
Now newly ris'n above the western flood,
And Phœbus from his morning-goal again
Had reach'd the gulphs of the Iberian main.
I wish'd repose, and, on my couch reclin'd
Took early rest, to night and sleep resign'd.
When – Oh for words to paint what I beheld!
I seem'd to wander in a spacious field,
Where all the champaign glow'd with purple light
Like that of sun-rise on the mountain height; 40
Flow'rs over all the field, of ev'ry hue
That ever Iris wore, luxuriant grew.
Nor Chloris, with whom am'rous Zephyrs play,
E'er dress'd Alcinous' garden half so gay.

A silver current, like the Tagus, roll'd
O'er golden sands, but sands of purer gold,
With dewy airs Favonius fann'd the flow'rs,
With airs awaken'd under rosy bow'rs.
Such, poets feign, irradiated all o'er
The sun's abode on India's utmost shore. 50

While I, that splendour, and the mingled shade
Of fruitful vines, with wonder fixt survey'd,
At once, with looks, that beam'd celestial grace,
The seer of Winton stood before my face.
His snowy vesture's hem descending low
His golden sandals swept, and pure as snow
New-fallen shone the mitre on his brow.
Where'er he trod a tremulous sweet sound
Of gladness shook the flow'ry scene around:
Attendant angels clap their starry wings, 60
The trumpet shakes the sky, all æther rings,
Each chaunts his welcome, folds him to his breast,
And thus a sweeter voice than all the rest:
'Ascend, my son! thy father's kingdom share!
My son! henceforth be freed from ev'ry care!
So spake the voice, and at its tender close
With psaltry's sound th'angelic band arose.
Then night retired, and chas'd by dawning day
The visionary bliss pass'd all away.
I mourn'd my banish'd sleep, with fond concern; 70
Frequent to me may dreams like this return!³¹

Cowper's translation is by and large faithful and accurate. To say so is not to damn with faint praise. On the contrary, Cowper demonstrates considerable skill in maintaining close and full contact with Milton's text while following, in a language inherently more diffuse in grammar and syntax than the taut and economical Latin, a couplet by couplet equivalence between translation and original. As had become normal in English adaptations of Latin elegiacs, Cowper's couplets take the form of rhyming iambic pentameters. These couplets lose the inherent variation of heavier hexameter, the regular metre of classical epic poetry, and lighter pentameter. But, like most good couplet writers, Cowper introduces his own rhythmic variety by altering the placing of pauses within lines. His couplets consequently reconcile tight structure with a degree of rhythmic freedom, and match each Miltonic couplet in turn.

A good example is his rendering of lines 25-6, from the section in which Milton rhetorically recounts the all-encompassing power of death over the natural world. Is it not enough, the poet asks, that death should ravage flowers, birds,

And all the beasts, that in dark forests stray,

And all the herds of Proteus are thy prey.

Cowper follows exactly Milton's division of the couplet into first animals of the forest, then fish:

Et quae mille nigris errant animalia sylvis,

Et quod alunt mutum Proteos antra pecus.

(And the thousand animals which wander through black forests,

And the silent herd which the caves of Proteus nourish.)

Cowper maintains fidelity in the literal translation of individual words, such as 'forests' for 'sylvis'; and in maintaining Milton's use of 'pecus' ('herd' or 'flock') for fish, which neatly links animals of the earth to their watery equivalents.³² Eighteenth-century poets were particularly keen on this kind of transference of language from one part of creation to another in order to convey the common quality of life. Cowper retains Milton's classical mythology in this case, Proteus being a god of the sea as well as a shape-changer. Cowper also follows Milton's syntax and rhetoric in beginning each line with 'And', and creatively finds his own way of extending Milton's anaphora ('Et quae' / 'Et quod') into his couplet ('And all the beasts / herds'). Cowper makes space for this rhetorical equivalence by cramming eighteen words into his lines, as against the fourteen in Milton's, largely through opting for monosyllabic words (such as 'beasts', rather than the obvious 'animals', for Milton's 'animalia'). Such fidelity to both language and style of the original does go along with some necessary liberties, but these are kept to a minimum, and do not detract from the original. For example, Cowper omits Milton's 'mille' ('thousand'), but his anaphora ('And all') translates Milton's rhetorical invocation of vast numbers from one construction to another. Where he does change the original, it is arguably for the better and is neatly integrated with the original. So Cowper's 'stray' picks up literally Milton's 'errant', but then uses it to prepare for a strong rhyme with 'prey', an idea that is not in Milton, but is faithful to and strengthens the spirit of the original. This is freedom without licentiousness, liberality consorting creatively with fidelity.

Further, in order to vary the cadence, Cowper places a strong caesura in the first line of the couplet, so dividing it into two beats, then three. The longer second part of the line is itself given rhythmic interest by counterpoint between the expected iambic metre ('that in dark forests stráy'), and the emphases demanded by the meaning and force of words ('that in dárk fórests stráy'). Cowper thereby adds a rhythmic intensity to Milton's original 'nigris ... sylvis' while maintaining literal meaning. The second line of Cowper's couplet then flows without a break, or perhaps with a minimal pause after 'Proteus' (and so later in the line than is the caesura in the first line). This couplet is set between two couplets of distinctly different cadence. The first of these (lines 23-4) has a strong caesura, oddly placed after a downbeat seventh syllable. The syntax and linking eye-rhyme (those / Whose') convert the couplet into two uneven segments of seven and thirteen syllables.

That all the winged nations, even those,

Whose heav'n-directed flight the future shows...

Lines 27-8 have an early rhetorical break, leading to a powerful rhetorical question that floods over the entire second line:

Ah envious! arm'd with pow'rs so unconfin'd!

Why stain thy hands with blood of human kind?

The whole set of six lines demonstrates a craftsman's capacity to vary pause and cadence so that the couplets do not become rhythmically repetitive while also building up the rhetoric from a vision of 'all' of creation being death's victims (the 'all' in line 23 sets up the emphatic anaphora of lines 25-6), through the powerful noun 'prey', to a climax with the entry of human kind, where Cowper employs exactly Milton's image:

Quid iuvat humana tingere caede manus? (l. 28)

(What pleasure does it give you to stain your hands with human blood?)

Cowper rounds off his evocation of death's destructive force by maintaining fidelity to Milton's meaning while strengthening the cry of human protest by connecting the paragraph's final couplet (lines 29-30) through another anaphora ('Why' / 'Why').

Several times Cowper does actually allow himself the liberty of adding to or improving Milton's text, but without yielding to the licence of departing from the original. Milton's opening line, 'Moestus eram, et tacitus nullo comitante sedebam', becomes, in Cowper, 'Silent I sat, dejected and alone'. Milton's first verb ('eram', 'I was') is weak and unnecessary. Cowper omits it, sharpening the line by keeping to one verb and rendering it tersely: 'sat' ('sedebam'). By reducing the verbs to one monosyllable, Cowper shifts emphasis to his trio of adjectives. These follow Milton ('Moestus ... tacitus nullo comitante'), but strengthen (not just 'sad', but 'dejected') and tighten (the phrase 'nullo comitante' is shortened to 'alone'). By beginning with 'Silent', Cowper launches his version with a striking trochaic, or falling, rhythm, which makes for a forceful opening and puts immediate emphasis on an idea at the heart of the entire poem. Grief stuns the poet into silence, but the work will end with a voice in the poet's vision offering reassurance.

The humanism of Milton's elegy for an English prelate lies not only in his use of Latin, the language of Renaissance pan-European culture, but in his adaptation of classical mythology to a contemporary Christian context. Milton does not reject paganism, but incorporates it into his expression of sympathy with, and celebration of, a Church of England divine. The Homeric gardens of Alcinoos we have already noted. More surprising is Milton's free borrowing from, and allusion to, the poems of Ovid. The story of Cephalus and Aurora comes, as we have seen, from Ovid's best-known work, the *Metamorphoses*, a resource frequently mined by Renaissance writers. But Milton digs deeper into the Roman poet. For example, line 32, 'Roscidus occiduis Hesperus exit aquis' ('Dewy Hesperus emerges from the western seas'), adapts a line in Ovid's *Fasti*: 'Hesperos et fusco roscidus ibat equo'³³ ('Dewy Hesperus rode his dark horse').

Most daringly, Milton chooses to end his elegy with an adaptation of the final line of Ovid's erotic poem, *Amores*, book I, 5, where the poet, having narrated his experience of an amatory encounter one sultry afternoon, concludes by expressing a wish that his future may bring him many more such. Milton's line, 'Talia contingant somnia saepe mihi', would have been readily recognised by contemporary readers as alluding to Ovid. Christopher Marlowe's translation remains a well-known favourite today, with its exclamatory ending, 'Love send me more such after-noonnes as this'.³⁴ This is pretty risqué territory in an elegy for an Anglican bishop. It is the most startling instance of Milton's open eclecticism. We may be reminded of Cowper's defence of Milton in his letter to Bagot: his mind 'could not be narrow'd by any thing'.³⁵ Perhaps this is the kind of thing Cowper had in mind when joking that he was too old for such 'puerile' poems?³⁶

What, then, is Cowper's response to these diverse classical references? He does not shirk fidelity, but does tend to play down the mythology somewhat. He is happy to render the last line with exclamatory accuracy:

Frequent to me may dreams like this return!

However, Hesperus in the borrowing from Ovid's *Fasti* becomes 'the star of evening' (l. 31). Milton's line about Chloris being loved by the gentle Zephyrus is quietly changed to 'Chloris, with whom am'rous Zephyrs play', the mythological story being converted, via the plural form, into the westerly breezes to which the god gives his name.

But Cowper is generally content to allow the luxuriant eclecticism of Milton's poem to express itself fully. This is also true of the beautifully descriptive parts of the poem, notably the passage in which Milton describes the wide plain which appears at the beginning of his dream and which is the setting for the radiance of his vision. For example, Milton's

Illis punicea radiabant omnia luce,

Ut matutino cum iuga sole rubent

(There everything glowed with a rosy light, as mountain tops
redden with the morning sun)

is translated by Cowper as

Where all the champaign glow'd with purple light

Like that of sun-rise on the mountain height. (ll. 39-40)

Cowper is here faithful to his original in the subject matter of each line, in his verbal equivalents ('radiabant', 'glowed'), in his phrasing of the simile. He even adds a touch of

richness. Milton, having in the preceding couplet referred to the wide plain ('lato ... agro') he goes on to describe, in this couplet simply refers to it by the deictic 'Illis'. Cowper, having faithfully rendered 'lato ... agro' by 'wide plain', adds a synonym: 'Where all the champaign'. This is a resonant and appropriately classical addition: the word 'champaign' derives from the Latin 'campania', meaning flat, level country. Campania carries a rich cultural significance in its designation of the region of Italy around Naples, popular with travellers and, particularly in the eighteenth century, landscape painters. Cowper enhances his description, throwing Italian light on English walls.³⁷

This amplification of his original occurs particularly at two critical moments in the poem. Cowper marks these by breaking free – on these two, and only these two, occasions – from the elegiac couplet / pentameter couplet equivalence. The first is the appearance of Andrewes himself, dressed in the robes of his ecclesiastical office:

Vestis ad auratos defluxit candida talos,

Infula divinum cinxerat alba caput. (ll. 55-6)

(a white robe flowed down to his golden feet, a white fillet
arched his godlike head)

Cowper extends these lines by rendering them in his only triplet:

His snowy vesture's hem descending low

His golden sandals swept, and pure as snow

New-fallen shone the mitre on his brow. (ll. 55-7)

Cowper illuminates the two whites (Andrewes' robe and the fillet around his head) by the simple snow image; but also cleverly manages thereby to do what would have been awkward in English: to differentiate between them in a way that Latin could do because of its different words for shining and dull white. Andrewes' 'snowy' robe is splendidly amplified in the phrase 'pure as snow / New-fallen'. These descriptions are contained in a mellifluous succession of flowing consonants: 'snowy ... low ... swept ... snow ... New ... brow'. His sweeping hem maintains Milton's lovely image in 'defluxit', so amplifying a sense of elegant movement begun in the original. Cowper includes classical touches in his syntax, inverting the normal English verb/object order in 'His golden sandals swept' and the adjective/noun order in 'snow / New-fallen', the line-breaking adding to the effect. Such Latinate inversions are a common characteristic of Milton's own English poetic style, so Cowper is also making his own elegant bow in the direction of his model. In English, Cowper is able to use the precise word 'mitre', where Milton was obliged to find a roughly corresponding term. He adds a forceful verb in 'shone', which carries the dazzling tone implied in Milton's 'candida'. By using it of the mitre, rather than the robe, Cowper makes the gleam climactic in the order of accoutrements and applies it to the supreme symbol of ecclesiastical authority. The effect of the triplet as a whole is to magnify the original and add status and power to his figure of the bishop.

Cowper's other variation from the form of Milton's couplets represents the second, and most powerful, climax. It follows on from the moment when Andrewes is received into heaven:

Nate veni, et patrii felix cape gaudia regni,

Semper ab hinc duro, nate, labore vaca. (ll. 63-4)

(Come, my son, and receive in happiness the joys of your Father's kingdom; henceforth be free from cruel toil, my son, for ever.)

Cowper's version runs:

'Ascend, my son! thy father's kingdom share!

My son! henceforth be free'd from ev'ry care!' (ll. 64-5)

Cowper's fidelity is again to the fore. He retains Milton's repetition of 'nate' ('my son'), and his image of 'kingdom', which is, or was, a common term in Christian theology and so suits the context exactly. He also keeps the freedom motif, but does here make one, perhaps significant, change. Freedom in Milton's vision is from hard toil ('duro ... labore'), but Cowper converts this to 'care', a more general word inclusive of emotional as well as physical struggles. He emphasises the word by making it the rhyming clinch for the couplet, adding to the original the idea of 'sharing' rather than 'receiving' ('cape') his Father's kingdom. The effect is to widen the original to take into account other forms of suffering than labour.

Cowper then expands Milton's following couplet into two couplets, one for each of the original lines:

Dixit, et aligerae tetigerunt nablia turmae,

At mihi cum tenebris aurea pulsa quies. (ll. 65-6)

(He spoke, and the winged squadrons touched their harps, but my golden repose was dispelled with the night.)

Cowper's version:

So spake the voice, and at its tender close

With psaltry's sound th'angelic band arose.

Then night retired, and chas'd by dawning day

The visionary bliss pass'd all away. (ll. 66-9)

Cowper seems to want to draw out the moment in which a voice speaks words of welcome, reassurance and the end of care. He writes of 'its tender close', where Milton keeps to the common Latin brevity of 'Dixit', signifying at the same time that the voice spoke and that the voice had finished speaking. Milton's golden repose ('aurea ... quies') is then converted into the light of day, but Cowper adds to its urgency and drama by imaging night as being chased by the dawn of a new day. Common to both is the paradox with which the poem closes. Sleep has brought a vision of splendour and illumination; day dispels literal darkness and the visionary gleam. However, Cowper's expanded version dwells more longingly on both the vision and its loss. 'Bliss' attributes the language of Christian redemptive theology, following up Milton's angelic chorus; but it is just the poet's sleep that is dispelled in the original, not an exalted image of happiness. 'The visionary bliss pass'd all away' is more total, more sweeping, not least because of the line's absence of a caesura. Does the reader catch a

glimpse, as the poem ends, of the translator for whom a voice inviting him to share his 'father's kingdom' could be only longingly dwelt on from afar?

Notes

- 1 *Samuel Johnson: The Lives of the Poets*, 4 vols, ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), vol. 1, p. 278.
- 2 William Hayley, *The Life of Milton, in Three Parts. To which are added, Conjectures on the Origin of Paradise Lost*, 2nd ed. (London: Cadell and Davies, 1796), p. 17.
- 3 *Lives of the Poets*, vol. I, p. 278.
- 4 See Martin Drury, 'Metrical Appendix', *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, vol. I: *Greek Literature*, eds P. E. Easterling and B. M. W. Knox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 897. For Archilochus, see pp. 117-28.
- 5 The present writer disowns any capacity to judge or comment on Andrewes' career or beliefs. The reader is referred to P. E. McCullough's excellent entry on Andrewes in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.
- 6 T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 3rd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 353.
- 7 *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, vol. I, ed. Don M. Wolfe (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1953); *The Reason of Church-Government*, with preface and notes by Ralph A. Haug, pp. 763, 768 [pp. 736-861].
- 8 'Praesul' was used by post-classical Latin authors in the general sense of 'director' or 'president'. Milton applies the word, *faute de mieux*, to the ecclesiastical status of bishop.
- 9 The dream vision is one of the commonest forms in medieval literature. The best known example is the thirteenth-century *Roman de la Rose*, translated by Chaucer, who used the convention in a number of his own poems. The most familiar later example is probably Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*.
- 10 Quotations from *The Poems of John Milton*, ed. John Carey and Alastair Fowler (London: Longmans, 1968).
- 11 Letter to John Johnson, 9 August 1791, *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, ed. James King and Charles Ryskamp, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 557.
- 12 Letter to Walter Bagot, 6 September 1791, *Letters*, vol. 3, p. 570.
- 13 Letter to Samuel Rose, 14 September 1791, *Letters*, vol. 3, p. 572.
- 14 Letter to James Hurdis, 10 December 1791, *Letters*, vol. 3, p. 597.
- 15 Letter to William Hayley, 26 December 1792, *Letters*, vol. 4 (1984), p. 265.
- 16 Letter to William Hayley, 8 December 1793, *Letters*, vol. 4, p. 439.
- 17 *Lives of the Poets*, vol. 1, p. 290.
- 18 Letters to Samuel Rose, 30 October 1791, *Letters*, vol. 3, p. 582; and to Joseph Hill, 14 November 1791, *Letters*, vol. 3, p. 585.
- 19 Letter to James Hurdis, 21 February 1792, *Letters*, vol. 4, p. 18.
- 20 Letter to Samuel Rose, 30 October 1791, *Letters*, vol. 3, p. 582.
- 21 See OED, 'puerile' 1. The word derives from Latin 'puer', meaning a boy, a youth.
- 22 Letter to Joseph Hill, 14 November 1791, *Letters*, vol. 3, p. 585.
- 23 *Gentleman's Magazine*, August 1785, vol. 55, pp. 610-13, *Letters*, vol. 5 (1986), pp. 51-8; *Letters*, vol. 5, pp. 61-9.

- 24 *Letters*, vol. 5, pp. 61 and 53.
- 25 *Letters*, vol. 5, pp. 52 and 61.
- 26 *Letters*, vol. 5, p. 63. Cowper later repeated these views in a letter to William Hayley, 17 December 1793, *Letters*, vol. 4, p. 441.
- 27 Letter to Walter Bagot, 21 September 1791, *Letters*, vol. 3, pp. 573-5.
- 28 Letter to Walter Bagot, 25 October 1791, *Letters*, vol. 3, p. 581.
- 29 See Dustin Griffin, *Regaining Paradise: Milton and the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 217-28.
- 30 James King, *William Cowper: A Biography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986), p. 235.
- 31 *Cowper: Poetical Works*, ed. H. S. Milford, 4th ed. revised Norma Russell (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 586-7.
- 32 Milton probably got the idea from Horace, *Odes*, Book I, ode 2, l. 7: 'omne cum Proteus pecus egit' ('when Proteus drove his whole herd').
- 33 Ovid, *Fasti*, trans. J. G. Frazer, 2nd ed. revised G. P. Goold (London: Heinemann, 1989), book 2, l. 314.
- 34 *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe*, ed. Roma Gill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), vol. I, p. 19.
- 35 See note 28.
- 36 See note 20.
- 37 Cowper, *The Task*, Bk I, l. 425.