

**THEOCRITUS,  
TRANSLATED INTO  
ENGLISH VERSE**

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Theocritus, translated into english verse by C. S. Calverley

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*TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH VERSE.*

BY

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## PREFACE.

I HAD intended translating all or nearly all these Idylls into blank verse, as the natural equivalent of Greek or of Latin hexameters; only deviating into rhyme where occasion seemed to demand it. But I found that other metres had their special advantages: the fourteen-syllable line in particular has that, among others, of containing about the same number of syllables as an ordinary line of Theocritus. And there is also no doubt something gained by variety.

Several recent writers on the subject have laid down that every translation of Greek poetry, especially bucolic poetry, must be in rhyme of some sort. But they have seldom stated, and it is hard to see, why. There is no rhyme in the original, and *primâ facie* should be none in the translation. Professor Blackie has, it is

true, pointed out the "assonances, alliterations, and rhymes," which are found in more or less abundance in Ionic Greek.\* These may of course be purely accidental, like the hexameters in Livy or the blank-verse lines in Mr. Dickens's prose: but accidental or not (it may be said) they are there, and ought to be recognised. May we not then recognise them by introducing similar assonances, etc. here and there into the English version? or by availing ourselves of what Professor Blackie again calls attention to, the "compensating powers" † of English? I think with him that it was hard to speak of our language as one which "transforms *boos megalio boién* into 'great ox's hide.'" Such phrases as 'The Lord is a man of war,' 'The trumpet spake not to the armed throng,' are to my ear quite as grand as Homer: and it would be equally fair to ask what we are to make of a language which transforms Milton's line into *ἡ σάλπιγξ οὐ προσέφη τὸν ὠπλισμένον ὄχλον.* ‡ But be this as it may, these phenomena are surely too

\* BLACKIE'S *Homer*, Vol. I., pp. 413, 414.

† *Ibid.*, page 377, etc.

‡ Professor Kingsley.



rare and too arbitrary to be adequately represented by any regularly recurring rhyme: and the question remains, what is there in the unrhymed original to which rhyme answers?

To me its effect is to divide the verse into couplets, triplets, or (if the word may include them all) *stanzas* of some kind. Without rhyme we have no apparent means of conveying the effect of stanzas. There are of course devices such as repeating a line or part of a line at stated intervals, as is done in 'Tears, idle tears' and elsewhere: but clearly none of these would be available to a translator. Where therefore he has to express stanzas, it is easy to see that rhyme may be admissible and even necessary. Pope's couplet may (or may not) stand for elegiacs, and the *In Memoriam* stanza for some one of Horace's metres. Where the heroes of Virgil's Eclogues sing alternately four lines each, Gray's quatrain seems to suggest itself: and where a similar case occurs in these Idylls (as for instance in the ninth) I thought it might be met by taking whatever received English stanza was nearest the required length. Pope's couplet again may possibly best convey the pomposity of some Idylls and the

point of others. And there may be divers considerations of this kind. But, speaking generally, where the translator has not to intimate stanzas—where he has on the contrary to intimate that there are none—rhyme seems at first sight an intrusion and a *suggestio falsi*.

No doubt (as has been observed) what ‘Pastorals’ we have are mostly written in what is called the heroic measure. But the reason is, I suppose, not far to seek. Dryden and Pope wrote ‘heroics,’ not from any sense of their fitness for bucolic poetry, but from a sense of their universal fitness: and their followers copied them. But probably no scholar would affirm that any poem, original or translated, by Pope or Dryden or any of their school, really resembles in any degree the bucolic poetry of the Greeks. Mr. Morris, whose poems appear to me to resemble it more almost than anything I have ever seen, of course writes what is technically Pope’s metre, and equally of course is not of Pope’s school. Whether or no Pope and Dryden *intended* to resemble the old bucolic poets in style is, to say the least, immaterial. If they did not, there is no reason whatever why any of us

who do should adopt their metre: if they did and failed, there is every reason why we should select a different one.

Professor Conington has adduced one cogent argument against blank verse: that is, that hardly any of us can write it.\* But if this is so—if the ‘blank verse’ which we write is virtually prose in disguise—the addition of rhyme would only make it rhymed prose, and we should be as far as ever from “verse really deserving the name.” † Unless (which I can hardly imagine) the mere incident of ‘terminal consonance’ can constitute that verse which would not be verse independently, this argument is equally good against attempting verse of any kind: we should still be writing disguised, and had better write undisguised, prose. Prose translations are of course tenable, and are (I am told) advocated by another very eminent critic. These considerations against them occur to one: that, among the characteristics of his original which the translator is bound to preserve, one is that he wrote metrically; and that the prattle which passes

\* Preface to CONINGTON'S *Æneid*, page ix.

† *Ibid.*