

THE RENDERING INTO ENGLISH OF THE GREEK AORIST AND PERFECT

I TRUST it will not be imagined that in writing on certain tenses of the Greek verb I am proposing to run amuck among all scholars—English and German, American and French—of the present and the past as to the sense and use of these tenses, or that I am undertaking to show that in some considerable degree the Greek verb has been misunderstood. Nothing of the kind. Even if I am able to add a handful or two to the granary already well stored with wheat by the labour and industry of earlier students, it is but a handful or two after all ; that these tenses are in the main perfectly understood by scholars is not, and cannot be, questioned. What may be questioned is whether they are always satisfactorily rendered *into English*. In short we have before us a problem of Comparative Grammar which I venture to think has not yet been adequately discussed, and towards an adequate discussion my wish is to offer now some contribution.

For it is much too commonly believed and taught that the Greek Aorist Indicative (for my remarks will deal chiefly with the Indicative mood) is equivalent to the Simple Past Tense in English (I *wrote*, I *loved*, I *brought*), and the Greek Perfect to the English Perfect (I *have written*, &c.), with only occasional exceptions scarcely worthy of serious notice.*

* Thus the late eminently learned Bishop of Durham uses the same names as applicable to both languages, when he deplures "the confusion of the *aorist* and the *perfect*" in the A.V., and adds: "It is not meant to assert that the aorist can always be rendered by an aorist and the perfect by a perfect in English." (*On a Fresh Revision of the English New Testament*, p. 82.)

This is much as if any one knowing that the Iberian Peninsula is of about the same extent as France, and that they are both tolerably compact in shape, should conclude that if maps of these countries drawn to the same scale be compared by superposition (as we prove the equality of certain pairs of triangles or segments of circles in some of the familiar propositions of Euclid), they will at least very nearly coincide. Let him try the experiment, and he will find that here France will largely overlap, there the Peninsula, and if the maps are correctly drawn, by no ingenuity can one be made to fit with any approach to exactness upon the other. Correctly drawn : dropping the figure, I affirm that the English Past, used according to the *true English idiom*, will largely fail to coincide with the Aorist of the Greek verb ; and so of the two Perfects.

Moreover, I do not propose to subject these tenses to complete and exhaustive treatment, and to go once more over all the ground that the labours of so many able and eminent grammarians have already covered.

I. In the first place, as to entire and absolute similarity of use, is it reasonable to expect it? Take the very simplest words that are in use—nouns, for example, which are the names of the commonest objects ; do pairs of such words *ever* coincide in any two languages? And if not words, and such words, how can we expect inflexions entirely to agree?

i. To illustrate this point. Compare the Greek χείρ with the English *hand*. In their prevailing use these words are perhaps equivalent : if I hold a thing ἐν τῇ χειρὶ, I hold it *in my hand*. But are the “hands” of a mill or of ironworks χεῖρες? Would a horse sixteen “hands” high have in Greek ἑκκαίδεκα χείρας? I have not seen in any Modern Greek paper how “an old Parliamentary hand” has been hellenized, but παλαιὰ βουλευτικὴ χεῖρ seems doubtful ; and altering the first two words (or either of them) to γεραῖά and the not altogether inapplicable ἐκκλησιαστικὴ does not give a true Thucydidean ring after all. And when we find in a Dialogue of Lucian (not given in the common editions) the Shade of

Porsonus, after enjoying an evening chat with Socrates and old Musæus, breaking it off—and breaking off certain old habits of his also—with the words, which he instinctively throws into metre—

“ ἄλλ’ ὦδε γάρ τοι κλεψύδραν μικράν τινα
 ἄνδρον ἔχω τρόχια τε καὶ χεῖρας δύο
 ἔχουσαν, ἣ δ’ ἔτυψεν ἄρτι τὰς δέκα·
 ἐς λέκτρον εἶμι ”—

how the Athenian sage lifts *his* two hands! We are not surprised that he exclaims (especially as he is just a little reminded of some of the worst lines of that Euripides whom he detests, but whom Porsonus loves), “Φεῦ τῆς ἀνοίας τοῦ ἀνθρώπου· τί ποτ’ ἔλεξεν;”

2. And as *hand* is not always χεῖρ, neither is χεῖρ always translatable by *hand*. At least occasionally in Homer (as in Il. II. 252,

νύξε δέ μιν κατὰ χεῖρα μέσην, ἀγκῶνος ἐνερθεν),

in Hesiod (Theog. 150), Herodotus, Xenophon, Euripides (Iph. in Tauris l. 1404, where see Paley’s note), and always in Hippocrates and other medical writers it means not *hand* but *arm*. Ἄκρη χεῖρ is the fore-arm (Littré, Hipp. vol. III. p. 283), and ἡ ὄλη χεῖρ in Theoph. Protosp. *De Corp. Hum. Fabrica* includes the βραχίων and the πῆχυς (Greenhill’s edition, pp. 25 and 37). Accordingly *arm* would be the preferable rendering for χεῖρ in some places (as Heb. xii. 12) in N.T. Moreover χειραγωγέω (Acts ix. 8 and xxii. 11) is rather to lead by the (lower) arm than by the hand, if we accept the authority of Greek vases on which we see one person leading another, grasping him round the lower arm just above the wrist. And in Xen. Anab. I. 5. 8 ψέλλια περὶ ταῖς χερσίν is obviously “bracelets on their wrists.”

3. In like manner *horse* is not always ἵππος (towel-horse for instance), nor board πίναξ or σανίς—fancy an ἐπιστάτης τῆς σχολαστικῆς πίνακος!—nor tub (on the Cherwell) πύελος, nor queen (queen-bee) βασίλισσα, nor would it be safe for an aspirant to the honour of being A.B., T.C.D., to begin trans-

lating "a *power* of potatoes"; with *δύναμις*, whatever encouragement the Latin "vis frumenti" might give him in that direction. And just so the Spanish *suposición* besides meaning *supposition* is also *imposition* and *social eminence*; *sermón* means not only *sermon* but also *language* (like the Latin *sermo*) and *censure*; and *constipación* includes the idea of a so-called cold in the head. Indeed examples similar to these might be quoted by the thousand.

4. If then the mind or fancy or fashion of different nations so differently apprehends or so variously combines or modifies even the simplest notions, and the most solid and substantial elements of speech are liable to such vagaries—and what has been just shown in the case of nouns is equally true of adjectives, verbs, and other parts of speech*—how is it likely that such light and gaseous elements as forms and inflexions should not be vastly more changeable and fitful and fitting? If *horse* and ἵππος, with whatever certainty they may originally have been names for the same species of animal, yet came to diverge so widely in the later meanings into which they branched off, assuredly we may reckon with confidence that *σ* and *d*, even if (which it would not be easy to prove) they did originally indicate in ἠγάπησα and *loved* precisely the same modification of the verbal idea, would nevertheless in course of time assume additions and variations of meaning differing in different languages.

II. Again: while in English as compared with Greek it is so firmly believed that our Past is the equivalent of the Aorist that by many it is reckoned altogether inexact and unscholarly to render except very rarely, ἠγάπησα by *I have loved*, and the like, it seems to have escaped observation that nobody dreams of applying such a rule to the past tenses of verbs in any other pair of languages.

I. How was Jerome to distinguish the Greek Perfect and Aorist when translating into the Latin of the Vulgate, as his

* As to two of the particles see *Appendix A* (on Γάρ), and *Appendix B* (on Οἷν).