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Immediately Homer’s Divinities

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It would be convenient if “and Athena came from heaven,” read today, discharged the same divine force as “ἦλθε δ’ Ἀθήνη / οὐρανόθεν” (Iliad 1.194-5), heard recited 2,700 years ago; but, if we are at all sensitive to the singularity of our historical “now,” or even just to the fact that we speak a language dense with bewilderingly derived words like “Facebook,” “antitheism,” and “global economy,” we see that, with respect to at least divinities, the above English phrase must pale when compared to the Greek that it so literally “translates.” The English, whose “heaven” hardly means both a deposed god and the very star-thick dome above our heads, trivializes the event it describes; one gathers the original Greek does not.

So translating ancient Greek into modern English is densely problematic and fraught with compromise. Christopher Logue, however, in his “translations” of the Iliad, might seem to take this too much to heart. In many respects, Logue’s “compromises” (anachronisms, omissions, inventions) seem to be gratuitous liberties; and thus, in exactly these respects, he would disqualify himself as a translator. However, I will argue that in at least one crucial respect Logue’s efforts do not fail, but rather, powerfully succeed—and as translations. For Logue renders the divinities of Homer’s poem immediate, which term will here be understood to mean: un-mediated in some conceivable sense; vivid, almost tangible—as such, laying a significant claim to reality; anything but dull or trivial. As divinities are part of the Iliad’s very fabric of being, the achievement of their immediacy in a language and time that resists such immediacy would indeed constitute a very important translational fidelity. This paper will provide evidence for such immediacy in Christopher Logue’s version of the Iliad, Book I by first identifying this immediacy’s contextual
underpinnings and then, with these underpinnings in mind, analyzing Logue’s (immediate) rendering of Thetis.

The foundation for Logue’s accomplishment of divine immediacy is the world that he creates, in which divinities make sense, and further, are expected. This context, by always multiply preparing for them, thoroughly integrates the divinities into the translation; and such integration greatly sharpens their immediacy when they actually do appear. In order to both generally characterize this world-expectant-of-divinities and specifically establish how it expects divine appearances like Thetis’, I will analyze its two relevant basic characteristics: (1) the divinely privileged status of light, and (2) the close association of light, speed, silence, stopped time, and power insofar as these are all associated with divinity.

In the translation’s world, light’s divinely privileged status is the most fundamental “physical” characteristic underlying the expectation of divinities. Indeed, “light” is often inseparable from “divinity”; so, insofar as at any moment there can be more or less light in the next moment (which is always the case), this whole world suggestively shimmers. Here, shimmering always hints—more or less, depending on the disposition of its current beholder—at the potential or actual presence of a divinity. So this world’s human inhabitants are, to varying degrees, enthralled to an ever-present, luminous dynamic that is always either potentially or actually divine.

We will see the most striking examples of this when analyzing the actual rendering of Thetis; but, in order to see how Logue creates a world that is expectant of divinities, let us
look at some text immediately before a divinity appears. The following lines begin Logue’s translation and construct the space wherein Thetis will soon appear:

Picture the east Aegean sea by night,
And on a beach aslant its shimmering
Upwards of 50,000 men
[…]
and see
[…]
a naked man [Achilles]
whose beauty’s silent power stops your heart
[…]
Run with what seems to break the speed of light
Across the dry, then damp, then sand invisible
Beneath inch-high waves that slide
Over each other’s luminescent panes (5)

We are told to “picture”—with our mind’s eye—a “shimmering” night-sea and then a beach. But this beach is not independently posited; it is, first and foremost, aslant the sea’s shimmering. So the very shimmering of the sea (out of whose depths Thetis is soon to materialize) first orients the beach. In fact, because “aslant” mostly resists figurative construal, the beach seems to physically depend on this shimmering with a disorienting literalness. Further on, we are shown the sea’s “inch-high waves,” which are—or rather, have—“luminescent panes” that the waves themselves “slide over”; presumably, the waves have these panes insofar as they have light. The liquid, nasal, and sibilant consonants of these last two lines ever more intensely focus our attention on the scene’s luminous dynamic.
by both recalling the “aslant” its “shimmering” of the beginning and continuing locally to concentrate in the light-associated words (“slide,” “luminescent panes”). And, though this description so vividly privileges the play of light on the sea, we are not given any source for this light except the sea itself. We might think “oh, it’s just the moon,” but until the moon is named (and it never is), the passage significantly constrains us to ascribe to the sea itself a certain agency for shimmering. And this is not incidental, because the sea’s strangely fundamental shimmering is already priming us for Thetis’ appearance.

Furthermore, this passage defines its focal point—who is not some part of the gleaming environs, but rather the magnificent Achilles—with unambiguous reference to light; we are bidden “see” Achilles “run with what seems to break the speed of light,” so he finds definition by appearing to surpass one of light’s qualities, its renowned speed. Considering both Achilles’ hubris and god-like physique, and light’s divine associations in this world, it is fitting that Achilles’ first notable act is to at once vie with and move like light. Here Achilles’ very movement further tightens the complex association of light and divinity.

Thus, the translation’s opening passage already variously establishes the privileged status of light so fundamental to its world-expectant-of-divinities; reading it, we begin to learn about this enigmatic world and may already feel ourselves starting to expect divinities. But if we are still skeptical, let us look at the second relevant “physical” characteristic of this divinely-expectant world: the association of light, speed, silence, stopped time, and power. Though this characteristic is notably present in the opening passage (cf., again, Achilles as he runs faster-than-light, and “whose beauty’s silent power” is heart-stopping), it finds its most explicit expression in Achilles’ brief and bracing speech on honor:
Do not tell Agamemnon honour is
No mortal thing, but ever in creation,
Vital, free, like speed, like light,
Like silence, like the gods,
The movement of the stars! Beyond the stars!
Dividing man from beast, hero from host,
That proves best, best, that only death can reach,
Yet cannot die because it will be said, be sung,
Now, and in time to be, for evermore. (22)

“No mortal thing,” honor is the universally accepted means for a human to become like a
god in the Homeric world; therefore, it can also serve to associate the seemingly disparate
(but divinely related) light, speed, silence, stopped time, and power. Indeed, the five are here
quickly conflated: light, speed, and silence are connected tightly by a series of “like”’s and
are implicitly present in “The movement of the stars”; mortal time is stopped by the
immortality of honor as it is “sung, / Now, and in time to be, for evermore”; finally, power is
evoked in manifold ways by the passage as a whole, and by close association with “ever in
creation, / vital, free."

These five “phenomena”—they are too disparate to be called anything else—might
find a sort of unity in Post-Newtonian theoretical physics; but if they find unity there at all,
it must be one that is tenuously qualified and forbidden to human perception. Here, in the
world Logue is creating, we may watch as the five are rapidly cast into a nearly-tangible,
densely-pointed constellation by god-like Achilles as he strains to express what honor
should, but does not, mean to Agamemnon; and—emboldened by Achilles’ passion, or
carried away by the driving rhythm of images—we might even briefly witness this
constellation in its completion, singing its own impossible dimensions before it fades. So here, as in the opening passage, Logue’s translation convincingly bypasses the modern-scientific categorization of reality, which categorization establishes rigid divisions between its “phenomena” and so literally poses difficulties for a modern who might desire to feel the force of something like τιμή (“honor”) or κλέος (“glory”)… or a divinity immediately.

So—though in a modernized world “light” does not usually presage the likes of a Thetis; though light, speed, silence, stopped time, and power ordinarily strike us quite separately; and though our “honor” is no τιμή—Logue does what he can with synesthetic imagery and tortuous language. And, indeed, he does much, because the strange conflations by which Logue defines the world of his translation imbue that world with a fundamental mystery. And where there is such mystery, there may also be divinities.

At this point—bolstered by a divinely-privileged light and a thoroughly conflated five-fold of light, speed, silence, stopped time, and power—we are perhaps enough at home in the translation’s world to experience the divine immediacy that it expects. So let us finally glimpse Thetis:

Sometimes
Before the gods appear
Something is marked:
A noise. A note, perhaps. Perhaps
A change of temperature. Or else, as now,
The scent of oceanic lavender,
That even as it drew his [Achilles’] mind
Drew from the seal-coloured sea onto the beach
A mist that moved like weed, then stood, then turned
Into his mother, Thetis’, mother lovelost face,
[...]
The sea as quiet as light. (6)

We begin with something like a god-detection paradigm that proceeds in radical uncertainty, checked by line-breaks, punctuation, “something,” “sometimes,” and two “perhaps”’s (in a row). Multiply reinforced, such uncertainty inspires in us an intense and immediate sense of possibility—especially because it is woven into something so urgently fascinating as a description of the very precedents of divinity. But this diffused uncertainty soon sharpens into the specific and the actual, “as now” Thetis is actually gathering herself from both the sea and Achilles’ mind. Logue is even more precise: it is the marked “scent of oceanic lavender” that draws “a mist” “onto the beach” simultaneously from both Achilles’ mind and the (“seal-coloured”) sea. This “mist”—or is it now a “weed”?—from which the goddess is still indistinguishable, then further changes its shape until it becomes a she and a face: Thetis. Finally, after so much involution, Logue gracefully affirms her presence with a line that invokes both fundamental “physical” characteristics of the divine-expecting world and that carries so much weight it needs its own stanza: “The sea as quiet as light.”

Here, Thetis is immediate. She’s certainly—to return to the posited definition of “immediate”—neither dull nor trivial. In fact, she’s vivid, almost tangible; so, in at least this way, she lays a significant claim to reality. Finally, she is truly un-mediated in the following urgent sense: the twisted language and concepts in which she is brought to us go a long way toward cutting through the mediation of 2,700 years of linguistic, conceptual, and cultural accretion that can make the divinities in Homer’s poem seem trite. Such conceptual and
linguistic torsion can make us feel afresh the strangeness, indeed the mystery, of things—of divinities, even if for the most part this may mean only to feel the (shimmering) mystery of their absence. And this feeling of absent and then obscurely glimpsed divinities is arresting and absolutely un-mediated.

By accomplishing the immediacy of the divine forces that move the Iliad, Logue displays a real fidelity to Homer—a fidelity which, because achieved in a time and language that resist such things as Greek divinities, is necessarily “unconventional” and may appear “unfaithful.” But no matter, because we already have “faithful” translations; in Logue’s translations we may find another, daring fidelity. Logue would be the last person to kill Athena by giving us “and Athena came from heaven” for “ἦλθε δ᾽ Ἀθήνη / οὐρανόθεν.” Indeed, when a massive, god-like Achilles is moments away from fordoing Agamemnon, when “Achilles’ face / is like a chalkpit fringed with roaring wheat”(19), Christopher Logue would have us shiver, even if only slightly, at the strange and infinite force about to intervene:

And then,
Much like a match-flame struck in full sunlight,
We lose him in the prussic glare
Teenage Athena, called the Daughter Prince—who burst
Howling and huge out of God’s head—sheds
From her hard, wide-apart eyes, as she enters
And stops time.