

‘Nothing is ever truly *lost in translation*.’ Discuss.

Nearly everything is *lost in translation*. In trying to preserve the original, we falter at each step: word choice, rhythm rhyme, and wordplay. Not only are translations written in another language, but in a different place and time; even if we could write the same words, they would not have the same significance. The translator’s task is to embrace this metamorphosis, *finding in translation* that which the original lacked; only by engaging with the original, appropriating its message for a readership unknown to the original author, can a translation earn its status as a work of art. This essay aims to document that journey of *lost and found*, citing as examples translations of classical poetry, modern European literature, and even James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, a novel many deem untranslatable. In so doing, it hopes to celebrate that difference between translation and original; they are two literary creatures in a symbiotic relationship.

I. Lost

We fall at the first hurdle. Translating individual words seems easy; the French ‘jaune’ is our ‘yellow’, nothing more and nothing less. Let us therefore attempt the first sentence from Albert Camus’ *L’Étranger*: “Aujourd’hui, maman est morte.” Our translation will influence how the reader understands the novel’s protagonist Meursault, so picking the *mot juste* is crucial. Stuart Gilbert’s ‘mother’ is too clinical to convey the narrator’s close relationship, ‘mommy’ is childlike, and ‘mom’ is a jarring monosyllable.¹ Only ‘maman’ means ‘maman’, for which reason Matthew Ward chose to leave the word untranslated, and was commended for it.² This solution fails when translating from less familiar languages. In Vergil’s *Aeneid*, the protagonist Aeneas bears the epithet ‘pius’, from which English has a well-known derivation: ‘pious’. Unfortunately, our ‘piety’ is primarily associated with reverence to God; the Christian faith was nonexistent when the *Aeneid* was first published in 19 BC. Roman ‘pietas’ refers instead to a sense of duty - whether directed towards gods, family, country, or benefactors - and extends to compassion.³ Should we choose ‘pious’ and expect readers to understand Roman piety, or confuse them with the Latin ‘pius’? Neither suffices. In both examples, individual words colour our reading of the most renowned characters in literature; in translating the original, we risk miscommunicating the intentions of their author, but if we keep using the same words we are not translating at all.

Translating poetry is yet more difficult. As an example, we will look at Homer’s *Iliad*, which has been translated from ancient Greek into English countless times since the 16th century.⁴ The translator must first decide whether to render the poem in prose or verse. Prose translations are easy to read, but lose the lyrical qualities of the original entirely; the *Iliad* was once transmitted orally, sung by bards. Attempting a verse translation proves no mean feat, however. The original is written in dactylic hexameter, the metre of the Epic genre: each line is composed of six feet - the first four can be dactyls or spondees, the fifth is a nearly always a dactyl, and the sixth must be a spondee. A dactyl is a unit of three syllables: long, short, short. A spondee is a unit of two syllables: long, long. It is nearly impossible to preserve this metre in English, and stay faithful to the character of the original. First, syllables in English are distinguished by stress (stressed, unstressed) rather than length (long, short), which did not exist in ancient Greek. Secondly, English is poorly suited to dactylic hexameter; many poets have attempted the metre as an exercise, but perhaps only Longfellow’s *Evangeline* remains well-known and celebrated. This is because English is stress-timed: the

¹ Stuart Gilbert, *The Outsider* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1946).

² Matthew Ward, *The Stranger* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988). For praise, see Ryan Bloom, ‘Lost in Translation: What the First Line of “The Stranger” Should Be’, *The New Yorker*, <<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/lost-in-translation-what-the-first-line-of-the-stranger-should-be>> [accessed July 2025].

³ e.g. *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 1378.

⁴ The earliest well-known English translation is perhaps Arthur Hall, *Ten Books of Homers Iliades* (London: Ralphe Newberie, 1581). This, however, is merely a translation from the French.

time between consecutive stressed syllables is similar, so unstressed syllables have to fit into this interval; the more unstressed syllables in between, the shorter each will be. Latin and ancient Greek are not, and dactylic hexameter requires regular intervals. Most translators are forced to use iambic pentameter instead, the most common metre in English and one often used for narrative poetry.⁵ Even now, the translator's tribulations are not over; he/she must decide whether to employ rhyme or not. On the one hand, rhyme was not used in classical poetry, and Milton scorned its use as the "invention of a barbarous age."⁶ On the other, nearly every line of dactylic hexameter ends with a similarly satisfying dactyl and spondee, and rhyme helps readers memorise the poem, just like the ancient Greeks. Whichever step the translator turns - prose or verse, dactylic hexameter or iambic pentameter, rhymed or unrhymed - some aspect of the original is lost.

Much wordplay is *lost in translation*, too. Of all works of literature, perhaps James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* relies on wordplay the most; with the addition of just two letters, a 'funeral' becomes a 'funferall'. One online database houses 99,788 annotations to help readers understand the novel's nuances, and there are many more to be found.⁷⁸ All of this complexity cannot be preserved when translating, stripping the novel of character. To appreciate this, we need not even open the book: the title *Finnegans Wake* is ambiguous enough. The unexpected lack of an apostrophe suggests a myriad of meanings, all of which coexist in the original:

a funeral vigil for Finnegans (Finnegans' Wake); a funeral vigil for Finnegans (Finnegans' Wake); Finnegans wake, the complete sentence (Finnegans Wake); the ship wake of Finnegans (Finnegans' Wake); the ship wake of Finnegans (Finnegans' Wake); Finnegans, wake! (Finnegans, Wake!); Finnegans is awake (Finnegans' Wake); Finnegans are awake (Finnegans' Wake); Finn is awake again (Finn Again's Wake); end again wake (Fin Again Wake); an Irish song (Finnegans' Wake); etc.⁹

The translator cannot convey everything, so must (a) either leave the title untranslated or merely transliterated, (b) choose one or two of the above meanings to translate, or (c) re-write it entirely. The first option is hardly a translation, and relies on the reader having experience with the original. Dai Congrong chose the second option for her Chinese translation: 芬尼根的守灵夜 (*Fēnnígēn de shǒulíng yè*).¹⁰ '芬尼根' is a transliteration of the name 'Finnegans', singular or plural, '的' is a possessive marker like our apostrophe, '守灵' means funeral vigil, and '夜' means night. In so doing, she reduced many linguistic possibilities to one, and imposed artificial clarity on a text that resists simplification; Joyce's original does not include the time of day, nor the possessive marker. Yet it is difficult to think of better, especially since *Finnegans Wake* relies heavily on Indo-European languages but makes little reference to Sino-Tibetan languages. Adam Roberts creatively employed the third option in his Latin translation: *Pervigilium Finneganis*, a parody of the Latin poem *Pervigilium Veneris*.¹¹ While Roberts thus introduced wordplay of his own, he lost Joyce's in

⁵ This is not to say that English translations of the *Iliad* do not exist, merely that they are unpopular for the reasons outlined. There are, of course, some merits; for the supporting case, see e.g. Rodney Merrill, 'English Translations of Homeric Epic in Dactylic Hexameters', *Anabases*, 20 (2014), 101-110.

⁶ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (London: Samuel Simmons, 1667).

⁷ Raphael Slepon, *Finnegans Wake Extensible Elucidation Treasury*, <<http://fweet.org>> [accessed July 2025].

⁸ As an example, I read "past Eve and Adams" on the novel's first line as a reference to Stephen Adams, the pseudonym of 19th-20th c. composer Michael Maybrick, best known for the highly popular song *The Holy City* (which begins 'Last night I lay a sleeping, There came a dream so fair'), to which Joyce alludes in *Stephen Hero* and *Ulysses*. This is perhaps the most-read line of the novel, and yet I can find no evidence of anyone thinking the same.

⁹ For an exploration of each in translation, see Patrick O'Neill, 'Translators, Titles, Texts: Reading the First Two Words of Finnegans Wake', *Quorpus*, 9 (2019), 15-29.

¹⁰ Dai Congrong, 芬尼根的守灵夜 *Fēnnígēn de shǒulíng yè*, vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2012).

¹¹ Adam Roberts, *Pervigilium Finneganis* (Ancaster Books, 2019).

the process. *Finnegans Wake* is notoriously difficult to translate, of course, but the same problems persist with any novel which includes puns or ambiguity; the multi-layered complexity of the original is *lost in translation*.

II. Found

The translation is written in a different context to the original, and will not retain the significance the original once had for its new audience; such is its curse, and such its saving grace. As an example, we will explore John Dryden's late 17th century translation of the *Aeneid*, and see for ourselves why he has been called 'the English Vergil'.¹² Here are the opening lines, before the poet's invocation to the muse.

ARMS, and the man I sing, who, forc'd by fate,
And haughty Juno's unrelenting hate,
Expell'd and exil'd, left the Trojan shore.

Vergil's *Aeneid* is an inherently political work; the poem describes the origins of the Roman people, and even features a vision of Augustus, the first Roman emperor. To some critics, the *Aeneid* commemorates the imperial dynasty: Vergil's patron Maecenas was senior in the administration, and although Vergil's dying wish was to burn the poem, Augustus ordered that the *Aeneid* be published instead, without much editing. Others read the *Aeneid* as a subtle criticism of the Augustan regime, or even the cost of imperialism.¹³ Dryden's translation appropriates the political interest of the original for the contemporary landscape, even in these opening lines: the words 'expell'd' and 'exiled' recall the deposition of King James II in the 1688 Glorious Revolution, who spent the rest of his life in France under Louis XIV's protection. Dryden was Poet Laureate under Charles II and James II, but the title was given to his rival Thomas Shadwell under William and Mary, new monarchs to whom he refused to pay allegiance. Between the lines of a translation written millennia after the original, we glimpse the translator's own sympathies, while celebrating much of the detail and flavour of the original. Dryden found something new - himself, and his world - in the *Aeneid*, and enriched one of the most celebrated classical texts, adapting a timeless story to his time.

There is more still to be *found in translation* when playing with language. Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky* is a nonsense poem, but has been translated into 65 languages since its publication in 1871 as part of his novel *Through the Looking-Glass*. As an exercise, M. L. West translated the poem into ancient Greek twice: once in the style of Homer (8th c. BC), and again in the style of Nonnos (5th c. AD).¹⁴ He remarks that "the principal object of the enterprise was entertainment," but admits that he "did not find it uninstrusive." West found something the original lacked, the turn of phrase of these ancient writers: the Homeric translation begins "Θηρα μοι ἐννεπε, Μουσα, πολυφλοισβον," a parody of the opening words of the *Odyssey* "Ἀνδρα μοι ἐννεπε, Μουσα, πολυτροπον." Few will ever understand and appreciate his translations, but no matter; he wrote for himself, and discovered through translation the versatility of ancient Greek, something which the original author might never have foreseen. Many Latin translations of *Jabberwocky* also exist, including one written by Lewis Carroll's uncle Hassard H. Dodgson.¹⁵ A few years ago, Nadav Kravitz - disappointed with these because most (1) do not rhyme, (2) follow ancient metrical conventions, (3) are unfaithful to

¹² e.g. Taylor Corse, *Dryden's Aeneid: the English Virgil* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1991).

¹³ For an introduction to the debate, see Emma Lezberg, 'Politics and the Pen: A Subversive Reading of the Aeneid', *Philosophy for the Many*, <<https://sites.williams.edu/engl-209-fall16/uncategorized/politics-and-the-pen-a-subversive-reading-of-the-aeneid>> [accessed July 2025].

¹⁴ M. L. West, 'Two Versions Of Jabberwocky', *Greece and Rome*, 11 (1964), 185-187.

¹⁵ Stuart Dodgson Collingwood, *The Lewis Carroll Picture Book* (London: T.F. Unwin, 1899).

the original in sound and meaning, (4) do not suggest etymologies for their neologisms - decided to write his own.¹⁶ His translation follows an ABAB rhyming scheme like the original, provides footnotes with the origins of made-up words, and seeks to preserve the sound and meaning of the original. For example, 'brillig' becomes 'proligrium': both sound similar, and 'proligrium' refers to 'snack-time' just like 'brillig' since it modifies the verb 'ligurrire', which means 'to lick up, feast on'. Kravitz also creatively combines words, like the original: he translates 'slithy' as 'slemti', an abbreviation of 'exlemtus', from the prefix 'ex-' and 'lim(o)sus' or 'lentus', which mean 'marshy' and 'sluggish' respectively. Both of these translations provide the student of Latin and Greek with a lesson seldom found elsewhere: with a little creativity and light-hearted fun, dead languages can be reborn. In so doing, they preserve the playful spirit of the original, contribute something of the translator's own originality, and invite readers to do the same.

Even when the translator seeks to stay faithful to the original above all, he still has something to offer. Charles Baudelaire's translations of Edgar Allan Poe's short fiction and poetry into French will serve as an excellent example. When he first got to know the author's works in 1847, he found his own unexpressed thoughts on the page; it would be his lifelong effort to translate many of these and bring Poe to a 19th century French audience.¹⁷ The French loved Poe more than the English, thanks no small part to Baudelaire. He claimed that he had to employ "français pénible et parfois baroque," using various neologisms, to mimic Poe's content and style, but T.S. Eliot even praised Baudelaire's translations above the original.¹⁸ So what did Baudelaire, who barely understood English and refused to deviate from the original, find that Poe missed? He found a new language, and a new people, more receptive to the author's poetry. As Harner notes, Poe enthralled the French with "the power of his imagination" and "his tendency to dwell on the macabre."¹⁹ The style of the original was ill-suited to the English reader, with its many adjectives, long sentences, and addition of Latin and Greek; Poe's English was itself nearly French, his ideas best expressed in a Romance language. Even without originality, as Baudelaire's work demonstrates, the metamorphosis of translation - a different audience, a different medium of expression - is enough to provide something the original lacked, and for the better.

To conclude briefly, translation is best understood as a journey of *lost and found*; much is *lost in translation*, but more still can be *found in translation*. The best translators approach translation as the collaboration between writer and translator that it is, seeking to preserve the voice of the original where possible, while daring to speak alongside. They recognise that it will be impossible to replicate that *mot juste*, the 'maman' of *L'Étranger* or 'pius' of the *Aeneid*; that it will be impossible to write in the dactylic hexameter of the *Iliad*; that it will be impossible to convey every interpretation of the title *Finnegans Wake*. They know that they are destined to miss the mark, and shoot the arrow anyway. Why should they care? They have something far more precious to exploit: a new audience, language, culture, history, philosophy. So they re-write the text, revelling in the metamorphosis of translation, but always responding to the original: Dryden substitutes Augustan politics for 17th century England in his *Aeneid*, and classical scholars play with nonsense language in their *Jabberwockies*. They need not even depart far from the original, just adapt it in some way, as Baudelaire's faithful translations of Poe illustrate. The original begets the translation, and in turn the translation enriches the original; the statement 'nothing is ever truly *lost in translation*' is not only wrong, but misses the point entirely.

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¹⁶ Nadav Kravitz, 'Tubervox: a Latin Translation of Jabberwocky', *Hyperphronesis*, <<https://www.hyperphronesis.com/2013/12/tubervox-latin-translation-of.html>> [accessed July 2025].

¹⁷ Joanna Richardson, *Baudelaire* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994).

¹⁸ Charles Baudelaire, *Histoires Extraordinaires* (Paris: M. Lévy, 1869). To Eliot, the original was written in "slipshod and shoddy English prose."

¹⁹ Gary Wayne Harner, 'Edgar Allan Poe in France: Baudelaire's Labor of Love' in *Poe and His Times: The Artist and His Milieu* (Baltimore: The Edgar Allan Poe Society, 1990), 218-225.

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