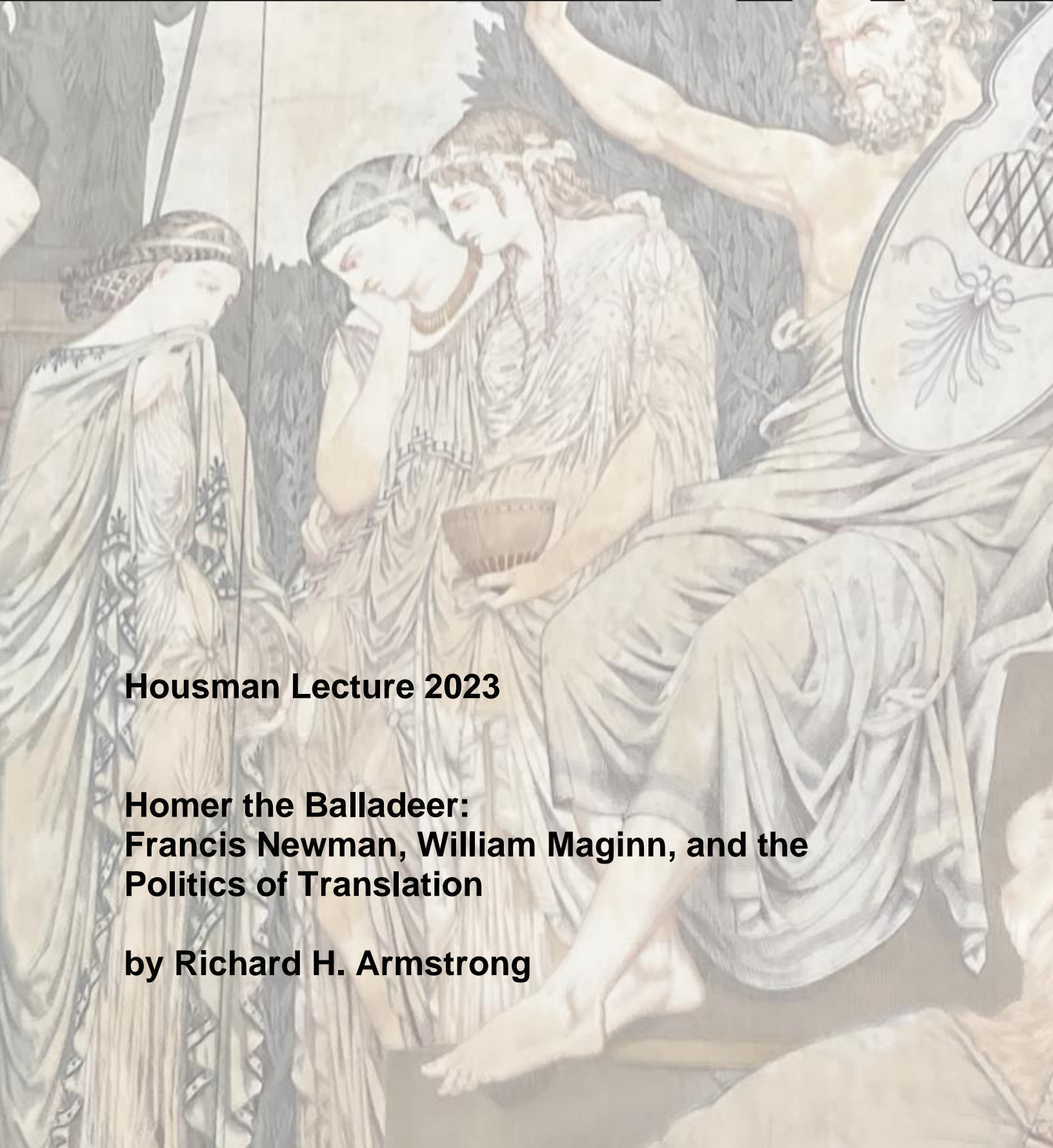




**Housman Lecture 2023**

**Homer the Balladeer:  
Francis Newman, William Maginn, and the  
Politics of Translation**

**by Richard H. Armstrong**



A.E. Housman (1859–1936)

Born in Worcestershire in 1859, Alfred Edward Housman was a gifted classical scholar and poet. After studying in Oxford, Housman worked for ten years as a clerk, while publishing and writing scholarly articles on Horace, Propertius, Ovid, Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles. He gradually acquired such a high reputation that in 1892 he returned to the academic world as Professor of Classics at University College London (1892–1911) and then as Kennedy Professor of Latin at Trinity College, Cambridge (1911–1936).

Housman Lectures at UCL

The Department of Greek and Latin at University College London organizes regular Housman Lectures, named after its illustrious former colleague (with support from UCL Alumni). Housman Lectures, delivered by a scholar of international distinction, originally took place every second year and now happen every year, alternating between Greek and Roman topics (Greek lectures being funded by the A.G. Leventis Foundation).

This is the fifteenth Housman Lecture, and it took place in March 2023.

Cover image: Marmor Homericum (1865), Wilkins Building, UCL  
(<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/culture/ucl-art-museum/marmor-homericum>)

**Homer the Balladeer:  
Francis Newman, William Maginn, and the Politics of Translation**

**Richard H. Armstrong, University of Houston**

When I received the gracious invitation to deliver this year's Housman Lecture, I pondered what topic would best tick all the boxes. Of course, one should keep in mind the eponymous figure of A. E. Housman, who was both a professor of Latin and a well-known English poet. My brother is a poet, and I take those people seriously; so, something to do with English poetry and Classics is in order. This year we are obliged to explore a topic in *Greek* literature, however. And naturally, I wanted a topic that would interest a London audience. Luckily for me, I had been doing some work on two Londoners, one of whom was Housman's predecessor in the Chair of Latin at UCL: Francis Newman, who taught here from 1846 to 1863. The other man is William Maginn, an Irishman who was a leading figure in the London literary scene, particularly in the 1820s and 30s. These two men could not be more different, and yet they were both convinced of a single idea: that Homer's poetry should be translated on the model of the English ballad. So, my task here is to explain why this is a significant moment in the reception of Homer in England, and not just a trivial coincidence. Furthermore, I shall have to justify my title's reference to a *politics* of translation, instead of a "poetics of translation," which is the easier way to characterize the choice for a ballad Homer; that is, as just a style or poetic form, and not a choice with political ramifications. My chief aim in all of this is to show what translation studies have to offer reception studies, and how they both can work together in this new millennium of classical studies, in which

we are boldly challenging many old assumptions about ancient literature and its place in a globalized world.

## **I. A Tale of Two Translators**

Let's begin with some biographical facts about our two translators. If you were to spend a day in London with each man, you would emerge from the experience highly stimulated but thoroughly exhausted; for they were both men of wide interests and learning, both polyglot and deeply political, both skilled communicators endowed with a surfeit of muscular opinions. Francis Newman (1805–1897), a native Londoner, was a Victorian progressive and free thinker who is hard to characterize—he was certainly not a stereotypical Latin professor. He was sympathetic with the Chartists, was a member of the Anti-Corn Law League, and promoted land nationalization. He also supported women's suffrage and marriage reform to better women's lot in life; but he vigorously opposed free love, contraception, prostitution, and vaccination. He was a staunch abolitionist and well informed on American politics from his long correspondence with Moncure Daniel Conway, editor of an anti-slavery newspaper in Boston.<sup>1</sup> In personal habits, he was anti-tobacco, anti-alcohol, and an “anticrophagist,” but as no one knew what that meant, they called him a vegetarian. But he was *against* the raw food diet and was certainly no vegan. He had weird habits of personal dress, especially that of wearing a rug with a hole in the middle, through which he slipped his head to wear it in cold weather; this made him a curious spectacle to the UCL undergraduates, who saw him as an amiable eccentric.

Newman's academic career started brilliantly at Oriel College, Oxford, where he took double firsts in Classics and Mathematics—in contrast to his brother, John Henry Newman, who

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<sup>1</sup> 76 letters from Newman to Conway are preserved in the Special Collections Research Center at Syracuse University (NY) and are discussed at length in Manwaring 1988.

failed his exams the first time around. This early success led Francis then to a fellowship at Balliol College, which he soon had to resign, as he no longer felt capable of swearing to the 39 Articles of Religion. He was immersed in Evangelical circles at the time and began a trajectory that would be the exact opposite of his famous brother. Over some years, Francis would go from Calvinist to Evangelical missionary to Unitarian, adhering to an undogmatic deism in the end that remained agnostic on many points of Christian doctrine. John Henry Newman, on the other hand, went from Anglican to Tractarian to Roman Catholic Cardinal and now Saint (he was canonized in 2019, though oddly his miracles occurred only in America). Francis' freethinking ways made him a natural for a place like UCL, "that godless institution on Gower Street," as Matthew Arnold's father called it, while John Newman's academic role was as the founding Rector of the Catholic University of Ireland, what later became UCD. The two brothers make an interesting case for comparative biography, as William Robins (1966) has shown. But the *third* brother, Charles, was an Owenite socialist; clearly, the Newmans took their sibling rivalry seriously. When Francis was determined to become a missionary and Charles a utopian socialist, their mother found them both "similarly self-willed," both convinced that "they alone see things rightly" (Turner 2002, 133). I mention their mother's verdict because it truly was a trait of Francis Newman that he could follow his own conviction with intense zeal and ceaseless energy, despite having no evidence that he was convincing his audience. This trait was sorely tried by his experience of two years in Aleppo and Baghdad, where he made no success of his missionary work, though he did learn modern Greek and, with great effort, Arabic.<sup>2</sup> We'll come back later to why I think that linguistic experience in the Middle East became formative for him as a teacher and translator.

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<sup>2</sup> For Newman's difficulties with Arabic, see his letters of the time (1856b, 47, 54, 59, 71).

When Francis returned from his unsuccessful missionary sojourn, he began teaching at the non-sectarian Bristol College, then at Manchester New College, at that time affiliated with the University of London. Finally, in 1846, he took up the Chair of Latin at UCL, where he taught until 1863.<sup>3</sup> As Professor of Latin, Newman published widely on topics that had little to do with classical literature, like *A History of the Hebrew Monarchy* (1847);<sup>4</sup> *Phases of Faith* (1851), a kind of spiritual autobiography; *Lectures on Political Economy* (1851), which were cited by Karl Marx;<sup>5</sup> and *The Ethics of War* (1860). He was working away on his innovative *Handbook of Modern Arabic* (1866), while still a professional Latinist, and studying the Berber language as well. But in the 1850s he published two works that showed part of his crusading zeal extended to literary translation: *The Odes of Horace* in 1853 and the *Iliad* of Homer in 1856. Now, as I'm sure you know, a few years after its publication, Newman's *Iliad* grabbed the attention of Matthew Arnold, then Professor of Poetry at Oxford, who subjected Newman's work to a scathing critique in his lectures *On Translating Homer*, which were very well attended.<sup>6</sup> For many people, that is the end of the story, so well did Arnold pillory Newman as wretched translator of Homer. But while Arnold found Newman the translator easy to dispatch, he had yet to encounter Newman the

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<sup>3</sup> Not 1869, as commonly reported in internet sources. This factoid originates in the 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and one finds it repeated endlessly online.

<sup>4</sup> From his preface to the *History of the Hebrew Monarchy* we get a clear sense of his dissent: "If the Hebrew history has hitherto been nearly as a sealed book to us, it is because all the academical and clerical teachers of it are compelled to sign Thirty-nine Articles of Religion before assuming their office. It is *not* easy to conceive how little we might know of Greek history, if, from the revival of Greek studies, test-articles had been imposed with a view to perpetuate the ideas of it current in the fifteenth century; but it is *very* easy to assure ourselves that neither Thirwall nor Grote could have produced their valuable works under such restriction" (1847, vi; original italics).

<sup>5</sup> Newman's *Lectures on Political Economy* are cited (disapprovingly) by Karl Marx in *Capital*, vol. 3, part V, chapter 36: "Newman expresses the matter insipidly when he says the banker is respected, while the usurer is hated and despised, because the banker lends to the rich, whereas the usurer lends to the poor. (F.W. Newman, *Lectures on Political Economy*, London, 1851, p. 44.) He overlooks the fact that a difference between two modes of social production and their corresponding social orders lies at the heart of the matter and that the situation cannot be explained by the distinction between rich and poor."

<sup>6</sup> The lectures grew to three organically. The first was given on November 3, 1860, but then a second was felt necessary on December 8, and then a third on January 26, 1861, by which time it was in proofs as a book. As the conclusion of the last lecture, he told his sister Jane, "I was cheered, which is very uncommon at Oxford" (cited in Arnold 1960, 238–239).

pamphleteer. Ever the staunch defender of his own ideas, Newman published a 104-page counterattack that took Arnold aback, forcing him in turn to respond with a “Last Words” lecture to sooth Newman’s feelings while setting things straight (Arnold 1960, 249). We’ll get into this in more detail shortly, but I will posit from the start that we should not assume that Arnold carried the field. Newman landed some serious blows in this debate, regardless of what one thinks of his translation, and his views have been championed by Lawrence Venuti, a major figure in translation studies.<sup>7</sup> But Arnold also made some crucial observations about conceiving Homeric poetry as balladry; so, his lectures remain a good place to start.

But first, let’s now take a moment to imagine spending a day in London with William Maginn (1794–1842), which, to catch him in his heyday, would require you to go back to the 1830s. A day spent with Maginn would thrust you into a thrilling throng of writers, like an elderly Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the young Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray, Thomas Carlyle. The day would also show you a very Irish London, filled with political discussions on the Irish question, about which Maginn had strenuous Tory and staunchly Protestant opinions; filled also with Irish people, including Catholic Irishmen whose careers owed much to Maginn’s assistance, like Francis Mahony and Edward Kenealy. Despite being solidly a part of the Protestant Ascendancy, Maginn might take you down to “the rookery” of St. Giles, where you would see him speaking Irish to poor folk living in horrid tenements (MacCarthy 1943, 350). If a day with Francis Newman would subject you to his teetotaling vegetarian virtue, a day spent with William Maginn would doubtless have passed in strenuous drinking. As we know from Thackeray’s experience, it might also end up in one of London’s more alarming brothels (Latané 2013, 160). Yet, as Thackeray also attests, there was one topic on which Maginn was absolutely serious: Homer.

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<sup>7</sup> See especially Venuti 2008, 99–124, where Newman fulfills Venuti’s desire for “foreignizing” translation.

Thackeray wrote in his diary that on one of the pleasantest mornings he ever spent, Maginn read and explicated Homer to his young protégé; “his remarks on it were extraordinarily intelligent & beautiful mingled with much learning, a great deal of wit & no ordinary poetical feeling” (cited in Latané 2013, 160).

Maginn was a native of Cork and had been groomed as a living advertisement for his father’s school, which prepared Protestant youths for entrance to Trinity College, Dublin. He was a child prodigy, heading off to Trinity at the age of 11, where he not only placed remarkably high for his age in the entering Greek and Latin examinations, but also took the first in Hebrew. While at Trinity he continued to excel in classical languages, but also studied Assyrian and Sanskrit—his linguistic gifts would always be his trademark, though whether he *actually* knew Hungarian and Swedish is impossible to assess. Though a Protestant, he was a native speaker of Irish and a defender of its poetic tradition, and he did much later in life to keep Irish culture a real presence in British magazines. But true to the ethos of his age, he was deeply imbued with the spirit of satire, as we can see in the title of a Latin poem he wrote while a student at Trinity called “Aeneas Eunuchus” (“Aeneas the Eunuch”)—sadly this text is now lost. By temperament, Maginn showed a strong affinity for ancient Menippean satire, particularly the works of Lucian and Apuleius, but also the verse satire of Juvenal.

After achieving an LL.D. degree and while still pursuing a career as a schoolmaster, Maginn was drawn into the world of periodical publication, now reaching new importance in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars. A broader readership was developing, and the pace of magazine publication was picking up with steam-driven presses; periodicals were also becoming more affordable, creating a constant need for more content. This new market for periodical writing allowed Maginn to taste a literary life beyond Cork and Munster and eventually lured him to



England and to the abandonment of his teaching career. He began with contributions to *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (a Tory publication affectionately known as *Maga*), in which his penchant for satire and parody was strongly evident and very welcome. Though his life would gradually be consumed with writing and editing on an almost brutal schedule, the fact is Maginn would not be a writer of books, which is partly why he remains a marginal figure now. His writing life was locked into an endless series of ephemeral performances in magazines and newspapers. Scholars such as David Latané and Terry Eagleton see the world of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* as initiating a kind of carnivalesque ambience. Eagleton notes of all the Corkonians surrounding Maginn that they were “drudges, parodists and *bricoleurs* adrift between cultures, shuttling from one (sometimes) invented tongue to another, gifted wastrels who squander their extraordinary philological talents on poems in praise of port, wicked burlesques of Wordsworth, and a pathology of punning” (1998, 199). This satirical, creative outlook amongst Irish and Scottish periodical writers has been interestingly termed “transperipheral” (Dunne 2014, 165).

Forged as a professional writer in such an environment, Maginn became central to the creation of a distinctly eclectic and conservative publication in 1829, when he helped launch *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*, for which he remained the chief editor and contributor for many years. *Fraser's* would become one of the most important magazines of the Victorian era, and it was the venue where Maginn's *Homeric Ballads* first appeared between 1838 and 1842.<sup>8</sup> They were posthumously edited and published in book form in 1850 by a young John Conington, which is how Matthew Arnold came to know them.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Leary 1994 provides an excellent analysis of *Fraser's* under Maginn.

<sup>9</sup> John Conington would be the first to occupy the Chair in Latin at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. Robert Mackenzie re-edited Maginn's *Homeric Ballads* and added other translations as well in his 1856 edition of Maginn's works.

If Francis Newman suffers from being overshadowed by his brother the cardinal and his opponent Matthew Arnold, Maginn suffers from being a man without a country: to the British, he was quintessentially Irish, but to the Irish of today's Republic, he was effectively just a "West Briton," as the insult goes. The Scottish novelist Margaret Oliphant saw him as "indeed one of the best specimens of the typical Irishman, the crystallised Paddy ... with all the unstable charm of a being beyond rule, guided by his impulses, and following them to much enjoyment and renown for a time, but soon into ruin and dismay" (1897, 364). On the other hand, the Irish literary scholar Bridget MacCarthy, writing a retrospective in 1943, dismissed Maginn as just culturally English: "He did not need to leave Ireland to become an expatriate Irishman. He was an expatriate Irishman from his earliest years. He would have said that he was a native of that British province, Ireland" (1943, 349). In stark contrast to the high-minded Francis Newman, Maginn engaged in what Eagleton calls a form of "self-fashioning roguery" (1998, 206), which did not end well. He died relatively young and penniless at the age of 48 from tuberculosis contracted while in a debtors' prison. But as we shall see, even his death became a kind of performance.

From these quick biographical sketches, you can see the idea of a "ballad Homer" could appeal to two very different men. By uniting them in a discussion of the "politics of translation," I should be clear that their politics in this instance are as different as they would be on many another topic. For an Irishman like Maginn to embrace so readily the English ballad is a clear political statement in itself, one flagging his Tory patrician tendencies and sense of English-language tradition. His production of serial ballads in the context of *Fraser's Magazine* constitutes a kind of *elite* performance, not at all an attempt to address the popular masses. In fact, Maginn's ballads show at times a satirical, aggressive quality that I shall characterize as a kind of *peacocking*. Francis Newman, on the other hand, was attempting to make available to a non-elite audience the

substance of classical learning; the choice of the ballad form was meant in earnest for its accessibility and popular appeal. But Newman's strong conviction of serving the public as cultural interpreter was marred by a self-righteous paternalism; well intentioned, he had a nonconformist's talent for pursuing unpopular ideas to their extreme end. And yet, Newman had rather innovative ideas on the politics of language—for the English language as well as the teaching of Latin—, and I will highlight later his linguistic politics.

My first move here has been to differentiate in biographical terms the two translators, whom Matthew Arnold lumped together in his lectures on Homer. I want now to introduce Arnold's judgment on the ballad Homers so we can get into the substance of the debate.

## **II. Arnold's Verdict**

Let's begin then with Arnold's verdict from his second lecture *On Translating Homer*:

This proposition that Homer's poetry is *ballad-poetry*, analogous to the well-known ballad-poetry of the English and other nations, has a certain small portion of truth in it, and at one time probably served a useful purpose, when it was employed to discredit the artificial and literary manner in which Pope and his school rendered Homer. But it has been so extravagantly over-used, the mistake which it was useful in combating has so entirely lost the public favour, that it is now much more important to insist on the large part of error contained in it, than to extol its small part of truth. (1960, 126)

Arnold admits here that the ballad Homer was essentially good to think with, but that time has shown it pays out poorly in actual results. It helped to break with the powerful charm of Alexander Pope's Homer, but what was to follow remained uncertain. Arnold's observation reveals an important dynamic of translation and reception: the shift in translation form, what we call the target text, occurred in conjunction with a shift in how the "original" or source text was being modeled.

If one thought of Homer as a poet who composed like any other with pen and paper, like a Virgil or a Dante, then the translation comes out accordingly in the literary high style of the time. Pope had managed to make a fortune off translating Homer in such a way in the previous century. But what if “Homer” is not such a “writer”? As I’m sure you know, these were the questions raised in the later eighteenth century’s Homeric Question concerning the authorship of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Most notably in the world of classical scholarship this occurs in Friedrich August Wolf’s seminal *Prolegomena ad Homerum*, but also in the *Scienza Nuova* of Giambattista Vico, for whom “Homer” is a name given to a process of collective authorship, such that the Greeks themselves were this so-called “Homer.”<sup>10</sup> But it is a mistake to assume one had to agree to the idea of collective authorship or folkish creation to dabble in the ballad Homer. William Maginn for his part was as staunch a defender of a strongly unitary and authorial Homer as was Matthew Arnold. Along with Walter Scott, Maginn thought the analysts’ view of Homer was “the great literary heresy.”<sup>11</sup> To understand the shift towards the ballad form in translation, then, requires us to take a broader view than just ideas about the source text.

The textual criticism of Wolf’s and Vico’s earlier philosophy coincided with the folklore revival in Europe and a new interest in shifting the focus of cultural analysis away from the isolated poet to the folk, that is, the nation and its organic expression through the national language channeled, quite often, through the mysterious figure of the bard.<sup>12</sup> Here, the publication of Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* in 1765 is of massive significance. Nick Groom has argued that Percy’s real achievement was to cut off the ballad conceptually from the

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<sup>10</sup> Wolf 1985; Vico 1968, par. 875. Note that Maginn discusses Wolf, Vico, Scaliger at length in his introductory essay (1850, 2–13).

<sup>11</sup> “Sir Walter Scott, I am told, used to call it the great literary heresy; and so must every one who looks upon the poems with critical or poetical eye” (1850, 4). I have not yet been able to locate this citation from Scott himself.

<sup>12</sup> For this transition generally, see McLane 2011; on the evolving sense of Homer in the eighteenth century, see Simonsuuri 1979; on the emergence of comparative poetics, see McLane and Slatkin 2011.

living popular phenomenon it still was, often a kind of *vox populi* that expressed contemporary political concerns, and to turn it into an antiquarian archive.

... Percy focused his energies on irrefutably establishing popular (printed) ballads as a crucial ratification of English cultural identity. In doing so, he drew attention away from the material of the ballad-singers and towards the treatment of ballads as historical corroboration and documentary evidence; traces and exemplars of an authenticating medium of transmission. (1999, 41)

As Groom argues, Percy's focus on the textual archive may well have been a reaction to the scandal of James Macpherson's *Ossian*, which was denounced as a forgery for a lack of corroborating textual evidence (1999, 92). Yet Percy himself clung mysteriously to a "Folio MS" that was fetishized and sequestered as his chief source; in Groom's judgment, it was "not really an artefact, but an artefiction" (1999, 102) used to empower his edition.<sup>13</sup> The 180 ballads of Percy's *Reliques* made a powerful impression, sponsoring further collections, like Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802), not to mention many "literary ballads" that showed the creative extension of balladry for further composition, a phenomenon we might trace from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner" down to Rudyard Kipling's "Barrack-Room Ballads" and Oscar Wilde's "Ballad of Reading Gaol."<sup>14</sup> In fact, it bears mentioning in the context of this lecture that the ballad form was very dear to A. E. Housman:

White in the moon the long road lies,  
The moon stands blank above;

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<sup>13</sup> The English and Scottish ballads were destined to inspire an "archive fever" over a considerable period. Francis James Child's *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (published in editions between 1857–1898) was the result of remarkable, painstaking research, as described in detail by Mary Ellen Brown (2011). In the digital age, the *English Broadside Ballad Archive* (<https://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/>) amasses over nine thousand broadsides in digital and transcribed form, along with recordings of the associated music. The founder and director of the archive, Patricia Fumerton, explores the archive with remarkable sophistication in her recent monograph (2020).

<sup>14</sup> For the "aesthetics of anachronism" in the literary ballad, see Sider 2016.

White in the moon the long road lies  
That leads me from my love.  
(*A Shropshire Lad*, XXXVI)

One scholar calculates that forty percent of the poems in *A Shropshire Lad* are in the ballad stanza and cites a rare comment Housman made on his poetry's sources, which lists as his chief inspirations: "Shakespeare's songs, the Scottish Border Ballads, and Heine" (the last much devoted to the German ballad form—Haber 1942, 118).

At the intersection of historical criticism and literary expression, we find Thomas Babington Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome*, inspired by Barthold Niebuhr's idea that early Roman history was compiled from early ballads—an idea shared, in fact, by Matthew Arnold's father in his *History of Rome*.<sup>15</sup> Macaulay's introduction gives us a clear picture of the state of this theory around 1842, which folds early Roman literature into a universal history of balladry. Long before Rome followed slavishly the literary models of the Greeks, Macaulay claims, there existed "a literature truly Latin, which has wholly perished"—indeed, it was gone before the greatest Latin writers were born (1888, 7).

That literature abounded with metrical romances, such as are found in every country where there are much curiosity and intelligence, but little reading and writing. All human beings, not utterly savage, long for some information about past times, and are delighted by narratives which present pictures to the eye of the mind. (1888, 7–8)

Macaulay claims this is a worldwide phenomenon, found in a "high degree of excellence" among the medieval Spanish, a "still higher degree of excellence" among the English and Dutch of the early modern era.

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<sup>15</sup> Macaulay refers to "the lamented Arnold" (1888, 6) in his introduction of 1842, since Thomas Arnold had just recently died.

But it reached its full perfection in ancient Greece; for there can be no doubt that the great Homeric poems are generically ballads, though widely distinguished from all other ballads, and indeed from almost all other human compositions, by transcendent sublimity and beauty. (1888, 10)

Macaulay's creative exercise, then, was to write "not in his own person, but in the persons of ancient minstrels who know only what a Roman citizen, born three or four hundred years before the Christian era, may be supposed to have known" (1888, 35). This act of historical ventriloquism was to become tremendously popular, despite Matthew Arnold's dismissal of the *Lays* as "pinchbeck," like costume jewelry (1960, 131). But we can see here how the ballad became a powerful vehicle for the invention of tradition: popular and polymorphous; primeval yet newly configurable; archival yet malleable to present-day interests, theories and concerns; the ballad seems to slide endlessly between folklore and fakelore, offering both documentary solidity and creative possibility.

Thus, the moment of the "ballad Homer" reflects a general shift in literary and cultural sensibility that, as Matthew Arnold observed, served to expose the artificial manner of Pope and the Augustans. William Maginn was quite explicit in rejecting the Augustan cult of *goût* (Neoclassical "taste" expressed tellingly in French) and sought instead Homer's primal vigor. In a long introduction to his ballad translation of Nestor's speech from *Odyssey* 3.66–300, "The Return of the Chiefs from Troy," Maginn took Pope to task for softening the aged warrior Nestor with such epithets as "reverend," "venerable" and "slow," when "he was, on the contrary, a fine, dashing old fellow," still vigorous and warlike (1850, 85). Maginn's post-Augustan sensibility has no trouble seeing Nestor as Homer did. "A hundred years ago, *goût*—taste—was predominant; and we could not call a spade, a spade, in any of the high or honourable departments of literature" (1850, 88). But the post-romantic reception transformed how both literature and Homer were seen:

We have found, that what chivalry inspired might be what the [ancient] grammarians and men of *goût* rejected. *So we got back to Homer.* The *truly* classical and the *truly* romantic are one. The moss-trooping Nestor reappears in the moss-trooping heroes of Percy's *Reliques*, and those whom the *Reliques* inspired. (1850, 88–89; original italics)

Here Maginn inserts a long quotation from Walter Scott's *Lay of the Last Minstrel*, describing the “marauding chief” Auld Wat, or Walter Scott of Harden, the great border reiver.<sup>16</sup> This makes a curious closing gesture to Maginn's introduction, a kind of *QED* that puts the creative fakelore of Scott in line with Percy's ballad archive, all to prepare us for Maginn's ballad Homer and moss-trooping Nestor.

To sum up so far, then: the first lesson the “ballad Homer” can teach us from the standpoint of reception is one of complex cultural convergence: the learned understanding of the Homeric source text shifted at a time when the nature of literature itself shifted; a new historical self-understanding of the receiving culture *coincided* with changes in classical textual editing and the amassing of a vernacular cultural archive. Just what the causal relationship between scholarship and translation may be is an important matter of detail, and one I feel can only be answered in individual cases. But the more radical idea I wish to highlight is this: modernity produces “antiquity” discursively, both in terms of the ancient world but also in terms of the modern or early modern world, as Percy's telltale title suggests: the *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. In essence, this is a tale of two archives, and the mediation could run both ways: ideas of an archaic, bardic Homer fed into ideas of English and Celtic bards, while collections of English ballads and translations of Gaelic poetry in turn created conditions for ballad Homers and lays of Ancient

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<sup>16</sup> “Fine as it is, the original description of Wat of Harden waving his helmet over his lyart hair, in the contemporaneous ballad, is still more graphic; and therefore, without going into minute particulars, more Nestorian and Homeric” (1850, 89–90).



Rome.<sup>17</sup> However, it is not enough just to sketch out changes in the “horizon of expectation” in a vague, general way. We must also look to the agency of the individual translators, the context of the specific work of translation, and the audience to which it is pitched. This is why I began with biographical specificity and turn now to these translation projects in detail.

### III. Newman’s *Iliad*

We turn now first to Newman’s *Iliad*, which ignited the critical animus of Matthew Arnold. Let’s start with a specific example, which I take from the first book; this is Achilles’ final, heated response to Agamemnon, which begins with a colorful insult, shifts to a curious ecphrasis on the scepter, then ends with the solemn oath that propels the whole plot forward.

Again the son of Peleus then	with words of altercation
Address’d himself to Atreus’ son,	nor yet from rage desisted.
“O gorged with wine! the eyes of dog,	but heart of deer who bearest,
Never didst thou with all the folk	put corslet on for battle,
Nor hardihood of soul hast thou	among Achaia’s chieftains
On ambuscade to go; but this	to thee destruction seemeth.
Truly more gainful is it, mid	Achaia’s ample army
To plunder of his gifts whoe’er	a word against thee sayeth;—
A king who doth his folk devour,	for that they all are worthless;
Else, verily, Atrides! this	were now thy final outrage.
But roundly will I say,—and swear	a mighty oath upon it:
That, by the sceptre in my hand,	whence leaf or twig shall never
Sprout forth, sithence the parent trunk	it left upon the mountains;
Nor bud will it; for by the brass	both leaf and bark around it
Are peel’d away; but now in turn	Achaia’s children bear it,—
Servants of Justice, —in their palms;	by Jupiter deputed

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<sup>17</sup> On the relationship between Ossian and Homer in particular, see Dué 2005.

To enforce observance of the Right:	(a mighty oath I tender):
There shall upon Achaia's sons	a longing for Achilles
Come, soon or late, on one and all:	but them, though pierc'd with anguish,
Unable wilt thou be to help,	when hero-slaying Hector
Shall hew them down in crowds:	but thou thy soul within shalt mangle
Enrag'd, that thou didst vilely treat	the noblest of the Achaians."

If you compare this to the Greek source text, you will see it is a reasonable “accounting” for the Greek, in that very little is left out in Newman’s translation. His line numbers reflect the source text, not the translation, so he holds his own text to account by that reckoning. You can also see straightaway this translation is not the “common meter” we associate with the ballad; it doesn’t appear strophic in form, nor is it rhymed ABCB, etc. Such formal assumptions for the ballad were only canonized at a later date in the nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> But the strong caesura in the middle is really a line break, as Newman admitted the necessity of printing it this way for reasons of economy (1856, viii). Newman rejected rhyme for his verse translation, but he found an added unstressed syllable necessary to prevent a cloying rhythm caused by the *absence* of rhyme. And yet he also asserts,

The moral qualities of Homer’s style being like to those of the English ballad, we need a metre of the same genius. It must be fundamentally musical and popular. Only those metres which, by the very possession of these qualities, *are liable to degenerate into doggerel*, are suitable to replace the ancient Epic. (1856, v; my emphasis)

As Arnold gleefully noted (1960, 132), an American can easily point out that the meter is that of Yankee Doodle; but Newman sought his metrical alliance with another nation entirely. Though he claims to have derived this meter by “an exhaustive process of argument and experiment,” he adds,

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<sup>18</sup> On the looseness of Victorian notions of balladry, see Henville 2016. Sider calls the ballad “less a stable form than an evolving discourse” (2016, 456).

“I found with pleasure that I had exactly alighted on the metre which the modern Greeks adopt for the Homeric hexameter” ever since they gave up quantitative meter (1856, vii); which is to say, the 15-syllable “political verse.” In a previous article Newman had argued that “the Greeks themselves have had to deal with the very same problem as we, and their solution of it will be of value to us, since they had a native sense of the aesthetic value both of the old and of the new” (1851b, 390). It seems clear to me that Newman is getting this information directly from Lord Byron’s “Remarks upon the Romaic or Modern Greek Language,” though Newman had learned some modern Greek while abroad.<sup>19</sup>

In this connection, we might observe that, curiously, Newman’s only spiritual descendant among translators might be found in modern Crete. Georgios Psychoundakis (1920–2006), a celebrated partisan operative of WW2, produced late in his life translations into Cretan dialect of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in the popular meter of the *Erotokritos*. This is the medieval romance in political verses by Vitsentzos Kornaros that has long retained a popular presence on the island. Psychoundakis’ editor praised his work in terms that might be seen as a fulfilment of Newman’s dream:

Homer and Kornaros, now reconciled, were being brought to life in the contemporary Cretan bard. Three different generations of poets with a folkloric base, three different Hellenic worlds were being harmonized ... In sum, there lives still on Crete a discourse so alive and expressive, worthy of rendering Homer. (1995, v)

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<sup>19</sup> Byron’s influence is obvious from Newman’s article though he mistakes a quotation from the satirical *Rossangallos* for “a well known patriotic address, stimulating the Greeks to free themselves from Turkey” (1851b, 390), by which he may mean Rigas Feraios’ translation of *La Marseillaise* or his *Thourios*. Unfortunately, this mistake in turn caused Lawrence Venuti to see Newman’s inspiration specifically in klephtic verse (2008, 106, 281 n. 11), which is not warranted. For Newman’s experience learning modern Greek, see 1856b, 7–9.

As you can see from the opening of Newman's *Iliad*, the similarity to Greek political verse is not far off the mark, minus the rhyme:

Of Peleius' son, Achilles, sing, oh goddess, the resentment  
Accursed, which with countless pains Achaia's army wounded (1856, 1)  
Τραγούδα τὸ θυμό, θεά, τοῦ γόνου τοῦ Πηλέα,  
τὸν ἐρημοκατάρατο, ποῦ μπῆκε τ' Ἀχιλλέα. (1995, 1)

Unlike Psychoundakis, who had a vibrant tradition of performance to fall back on, Newman had no illusions about producing an authentic folkloric Homer. In his introduction, he is very aware of the fakelore involved in his work:

Our real old ballad-writers are too poor and mean to represent Homer, and are too remote in diction from our times to be popularly intelligible. It is requisite for a translator to form his own style. [...] I am not concerned with the *historical* problem, of writing in a style which actually existed at an earlier period of our language; but with the *artistic* problem of attaining a plausible aspect of moderate antiquity, while remaining easily intelligible. Now, in doing this, I alight on the delicate line which separates the *quaint* from the *grotesque*. (1856, x)<sup>20</sup>

Thus, Newman was aware that there is a rather subjective line between effective archaism and ludicrous diction; unfortunately for him, he demarcated the boundary with the terms “quaint” and “grotesque” in a manner that gave Matthew Arnold plenty of ammunition for his critique:

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<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere, Newman had put this quite vividly: “But if any one is charitably willing to work up for the unlearned the raw materials of antiquity into a modern manufacture, he must not expect *those* to construct his machinery who work only at home-grown produce. He must rig his loom for himself; and though his tapestry will not be so soft and luxurious as the Hellenic byssus or the Persian silk, it may still express in bold and clear outline all the lineaments of antiquity; provided that this is made the principal aim, and is not sacrificed to the very arbitrary and vain desire of deceiving the reader into the belief that a translation is not a translation” (1851, 402).

This is a most unfortunate sentence. Mr. Newman is grotesque, which he himself says he ought not to be; and he ought not to be quaint, which he himself says he ought to be. (1960, 122)

For Arnold, Newman is grotesque precisely in the moment Helen says to Hector in *Iliad* 6,

Δᾶερ ἐμεῖο, κυνὸς κακομηγάνου, ὀκρυοέσσης (*Il.* 6.344)

O, brother thou of me, who am a mischief-working vixen,  
a numbing horror

This is grotesque, Arnold says, in that Newman “expresses himself in a manner which produces on us a very strong sense of its incongruity, and which violently surprises us” (1960, 123). Further on, Arnold exaggerates his indignation: “Where, indeed, Mr. Newman got his diction, with whom he can have lived, what can be his test of antiquity and rarity of words, are questions which I ask myself with bewilderment” (1960, 124). This Newman took as an accusation “of keeping low company” (1861, 47), though a friend of his later reminded Arnold that Newman had “lived with the fellows of Balliol” (Arnold 1960, 171). Newman responded that he does not hold the phrase κυνὸς κακομηγάνου to be quaint, but “excessively coarse.”

When Jupiter calls Juno “a bitch,” of course he means a snarling cur; hence my rendering, “vixen” (or she-fox), is there perfect, since we say *vixen* of an irascible woman. But Helen had no such evil tempers, and beyond a doubt she meant to ascribe impurity to herself. I have twice committed a pious fraud by making her call herself “a vixen,” where “bitch” is the only faithful rendering; and Mr. Arnold, instead of thanking me for throwing a thin veil over Homer’s deformity, assails me for my phrase as intolerably grotesque. (1861, 57)

Although much energy was expended on both sides of this debate in reference to particular words and phrases, it is important to see the forest fire for the trees here. Newman was eager to convey a sense that Homer’s style is uneven and various, and said so from the outset:

The style of Homer himself is direct, popular, forcible, quaint, flowing, garrulous, abounding with formulas, redundant in particles and affirmatory interjections, as also in grammatical connectives of time, place and argument. In all these respects it is similar to the old English ballad, and is in sharp contrast to the polished style of Pope, Sotheby, and Cowper, the best known English translators of Homer. By general consent, Chapman's version is far more Homeric than these. In regard to diction, Dryden in part agrees with Homer, namely, in his love of strong and racy words. A phrase can hardly be too homely for the true Epic style, if it be but energetic and graphic. Those words only are to be rejected as mean which are also weak and petty. (1856, iv–v).

It was precisely Newman's list of attributes that compelled Arnold to articulate his four "axioms" of Homeric style, namely: that he is rapid in his movement, plain in his words and style, simple in his ideas, and, most importantly, "noble in his manner" (1960, 141). It is the last axiom that sets Arnold apart not just from Newman, but from a whole critical tradition that fully accepted Homer's prosaic interests and lurid detail through the concept of *enargeia*, "vividness" or "effective representation" (in Trissino's words—see below). Newman strenuously opposes the idea that Homer is always the noble poet Arnold would have him be:

But if Homer were always a poet, he could not be, what he is, so many other things beside poet. As the Egyptians paint in their tombs processes of art, not because they are beautiful or grand, but from a mere love of imitating; so Homer narrates perpetually from a mere love of chatting. In how thoroughly Egyptian a way does he tell the process of cutting up an ox and making *kebâb*; the process of bringing a boat to anchor and carefully putting by the tackle; the process of taking out a shawl from a chest, where it lies at the very bottom! (1861, 65)

This passage strongly echoes the melancholy preface of William Cowper from the century before:

The passages which will be least noticed, and possibly not at all, except by those who shall wish to find me at a fault, are those which have cost me abundantly the most labor. It is difficult to kill a sheep with dignity in a modern language, to flay and to prepare it for the table, detailing every circumstance of the process. Difficult also, without sinking below the level of poetry, to harness mules to a wagon, particularizing every article of their furniture, straps, rings, staples, and even the tying of the knots that kept all together. Homer, who writes always to the eye, with all his sublimity and grandeur, has the minuteness of a Flemish painter. (1860, xii)

There is a discourse going back to the Renaissance, particularly to Gian Giorgio Trissino, that sees a descriptive amplitude or *larghezza* as an essential feature of Homeric mimesis, in contrast to the mere *sonorità* of poetry for its own sake—indeed, this was at the heart of Trissino’s justification for deploying blank verse in epic.<sup>21</sup>

In this regard, then, it is Matthew Arnold who seems to be breaking with this understanding of the essence of Homeric style, not Newman. And of Arnold’s four axioms, the most difficult to articulate is the one he insists upon most strenuously against Newman: “nobility.” As much as Arnold agrees with the balladeers that Pope’s elegant artificiality won’t do, he recoils from the idea that Homer could ever be ignoble, grotesque, or homely. Here, in contrast, Newman’s progressive sensibility was quite clear: “But I regard as Homer’s worst defect, his lingering over scenes of endless carnage and painful wounds. He knows to half an inch where one hero hits another and how deep” (1861, 66). Against Arnold’s pearl-clutching sensibilities, Newman seeks to vindicate the vigor of the English language:

Such verbs as *sweat, haul, plump, maul, yell, bang, splash, smash, thump, tug, scud, sprawl, spank*, etc., I hold (in their purely physical sense) to be eminently epic: for the epic revels in descriptions of violent action to which they are suited. Intense

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<sup>21</sup> I have discussed this elsewhere at length (2022).

muscular exertion in every form, intense physical action of the surrounding elements, with intense ascription or description of size or colour;—together make up an immense fraction of the poem. To cut out these words is to emasculate the epic. (1861, 90)

Long before Simone Weil, then, Newman had thus characterized the *Iliad* as a “poem of force” (Weil 2005).

For Newman, the strength and vigor of Homer are to be saved at all costs, even at the risk of a certain homeliness. “Mr. Arnold resents my saying that Homer is often homely. He is homely expressly because he is natural.” Hence in his peroration to his defense, Newman leaves us with a striking natural image:

[Homer’s] beauty, when at its height, is *wild* beauty: it smells of the mountain and the sea. If he be compared to a noble animal, it is not to such a spruce rubbed-down Newmarket racer as our smooth translators would pretend, but to a wild horse of the Don Cossacks: and if I, instead of this, present to the reader nothing but a Dandie Dinmont’s poney, this, as a first approximation, is a valuable step towards the true solution. (1861, 103)

Arnold, for his part, was backed into a corner by Newman’s response, and found it very hard to define Homer’s quintessential “nobility” and what he meant by “the grand style.” In his “Last Words” lecture, he appeals to it in openly religious terms:

One may say of it as is said of faith: ‘One must feel it in order to know what it is.’ But, as of faith, so too one may say of nobleness, of the grand style: ‘Woe to those know it not.’ (1960, 188)

Arnold’s long defense of Homer’s “nobility” begins to invoke it in ways reminiscent of the Longinean sublime. But some take Arnold’s use of religious language here as a symptom of the politics lurking under this debate: Newman, the freethinker of godless Gower Street, is being



whacked down by the Oxbridge Establishment, the tribunal Arnold constructs of the Regius Professors of Greek at Oxford and Cambridge, who are the only competent judges in his view of an English translation of Homer, and who, like Arnold, signed the 39 Articles of Religion. Such is the thesis of Sharin Schroeder (2012), following Lionel Trilling, who feels Newman's Nonconformist ways are the true target of Arnold's wrath.<sup>22</sup> I cannot say if this is correct as far as Arnold goes; frankly, as an American, the sectarian controversy here eludes me. But I will venture to say that the political dimension for Newman is really about a *politics of language*, and this warrants a slight digression.

My take is this: translation provided Newman with remarkable scope for exploring the *liberating potential* of language. His Homer, like his Horace, was meant for unlearned people who would never attain the level of Latin and Greek proficiency the source texts demand of us. He was deeply concerned with increasing access to classical learning for those historically kept from it, and for this reason, he wanted the Greekless reader to see Homer warts and all, just as the learned Hellenist does. But one can see from his introduction to the *Iliad* that the correct pronunciation of English was also an obsession of his, though not to reinforce class barriers. He felt "the unacquaintance of the many with pure and well pronounced English to be a political evil of first-rate magnitude," and that "to have two dialects, one patrician and one plebeian, is an incurable mischief" (1869, 144). His time in Turkey, he claimed, showed him that the poorest Turk could sit at a rich man's table "without the humiliating sense of inequality occasioned by a vulgar dialect," while "here the poor man is unable for five minutes to forget his essential degradation" (1869, 144). This condition is a gratuitous evil that proper schooling could address. Note, however, that

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<sup>22</sup> Another take on Arnold's attack on Newman is that he was one of the proponents for the reform of classical education; thus Arnold's criticism "represented a pivotal moment in Oxford's fight-back against the movement for reform, a regrouping of forces which quietly assimilated a good deal of the new learning while maintaining an aloof and unchanging appearance" (Phelan 1999, 174).

Newman was not calling for the democratization of linguistic standards; he aimed at pulling up the plebeian so that the patricians' exclusiveness was punctured, not at demoticizing the national language. It is important not to miss the paternalistic nature of his plan. In sum, Newman wanted a stronger national culture where classical education did not cleave off a ruling elite and make Greek and Roman literature a kind of code for privileged initiates. Translation was the great equalizer for allowing more people access to the content of ancient culture.

Newman's linguistic politics extended to the teaching of Latin as well, and here again translation was a space of creative liberation that was to assist in the effort. For a professor of Latin, Newman had strange ideas about Roman literature, which he felt was damaged by excessive imitation of Greek models. He felt Greek meters in particular came to restrict the native expressivity of Latin.<sup>23</sup> It was through his own translating into Latin that he came to believe Terence, Virgil and Horace "have done damage to the Latin language, or at least to our taste; just as Pope was the ruin of English poetry so long as he was allowed to dictate the style and cadences."<sup>24</sup> The proper way to study Latin, he professed to the end of his life, was to have students read *their own* literature translated into Latin (1891, 80–81), and to that end he produced Latin translations of *Hiawatha* (1862), *Robinson Crusoe* (1884), and an anthology of popular English poems (1868). These were mostly done in a stress-accented Latin that was only loosely metrical and not written in the quantitative meters of canonical Roman poets. His hope was that a more practical approach would then lead students later to read the canon of Roman literature, though given his critical comments on those authors, one senses it would not have been a tragedy if they

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<sup>23</sup> As early as 1840 Newman said in a lecture to students that "The glory of Greek literature is that it was entirely of home growth. This is no empty boast, but a great secret of its real excellence: the Latin on the contrary was in part deteriorated by too close a copying of the Greeks" (1841, 5).

<sup>24</sup> Newman relates this privately in a letter of November 30, 1857 (Sieveking 1909, 164). He said: "Ovid always seemed to me stupid in the extreme, even when it is not too difficult" (1891, 75–76).

did not move on to that. These were at the time strange ideas—and no one seems to have taken him up on them.

From a post-colonial perspective, we should also note that Newman's language methodology came directly from his own experience, not of learning Greek and Latin, at which he clearly excelled early in life, but of learning Arabic during his missionary years.<sup>25</sup> He explicitly says his "modern Latin" method was created from his experience of learning a foreign language in a foreign country, and he was working on an Arabic handbook simultaneously with developing his Latin materials. In fact, we find that around the time he is working on his Latin *Robinson Crusoe*, the inspiration is coming in part from his experience of reading a free translation of the same text in Arabic, published by the London Missionary Society at its Arabic press in Malta.<sup>26</sup> After retiring from his post in 1863, Newman's new Latin method books came out along with his innovative *Handbook of Modern Arabic*, which focuses specifically on spoken Arabic through transliterated texts: even Arabic was to be liberated from its traditional script in order for the rational mind to learn it.

I close this digression then with a new way to think about Newman: he found translation to be a space where the interanimation of languages fed constantly into his progressive agenda, in a manner that defies simple characterization. Like the Christian missionary, he felt translation was the key to liberation and progress. But Newman's translations were effectively like his many political pamphlets: salvos in a war of ideas too often divorced from an understanding of audience and the dynamics of reception. This brings us to the recognition that what is translatable is not always receivable; that there is indeed a difference between translation and reception that we must

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<sup>25</sup> Details of his study are apparent in his letters of the missionary period, see Newman 1856b.

<sup>26</sup> He comments on this Arabic *Crusoe* in a letter of September 1859 (Sieveking 1909, 174–175). In a letter of February 1860 he describes his Latin *Crusoe* as "rewritten quite freely (not a translation)," i.e., just like the Arabic text he was reading (Sieveking 1909, 178).

further understand. And for that, I turn now back to 1838 and the *Homeric Ballads* of William Maginn.

#### IV. Maginn's *Homeric Ballads*

It may seem odd to turn to Maginn here at the end in defiance of chronology, but as he was reputed to be the first to venture the Homeric ballad, in a sense we return to the source of the idea to look for our conclusions.<sup>27</sup> I do so in hopes of highlighting an essential difference from Newman: while Newman mostly failed to secure an audience for his laborious translation of the *Iliad*, Maginn succeeded in his balladry for knowing far better his public, his medium and his moment. Most importantly, Maginn's moment was not the same as Newman's. *Fraser's Magazine* began at an interesting juncture, as the embers of Romantic genius-cult were dimming, but the new Parnassus of Victorian writers had yet to emerge (Leary 1994, 106). Maginn's editorship falls in the period that Clare Pettitt has recently characterized as transformational for British media, when "the profoundly experiential dimension of repetition and seriality" created a new universe for readers and writers (2020, 23). Maginn was deeply ensconced in this new universe, and intuitively understood the kind of writerly performance it demanded. Thus, his *Homeric Ballads* were shaped to the rhythms of this seriality: over the course of 1838 Maginn published one ballad monthly, and did not overstay his welcome, though four more poems came out in the 1840s, to bring their total up to 16.<sup>28</sup> While Newman tried to conquer the whole *Iliad*, Maginn was content to be a reiver, just raiding Homer's *Odyssey* for what he could carry off for a month's work. What Maginn took

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<sup>27</sup> So John Conington claimed: "He may be esteemed the first who consciously realised to himself the truth that Greek ballads can be really represented in English only by a similar measure. This is his great praise, and will continue after the success of his execution shall have been ratified by other workmen in the same field" (Maginn 1850, xi).

<sup>28</sup> Conington's 1850 edition is of only the original 12 from 1838, but he published them side by side with the Greek text as they appeared in *Fraser's*. Mackenzie's 1856 edition prints all 16 ballads from *Fraser's*, plus three earlier Homeric translations that Maginn had published in *Blackwood's* and his four "comedies of Lucian," but he does not print the Greek alongside.

from Homer were often stories within the story, like the Tale of the Cloak (*Od.* 14.462–533), the Return of the Chiefs from Troy (*Od.* 3.66–200), and the Story of the Swineherd (*Od.* 15.389–483). The rhythms and advantages of seriality meshed well with his awareness of Homeric poetry’s episodic performance in antiquity. Thus, despite his quasi-religious belief in a unitary author named Homer, he did not fetishize the Homeric poems as wholes and could well imagine their piecemeal reception. Nor was he concerned with producing these ballads in a uniform manner, as if to reunite them later into a whole like a serialized novel. Instead, he took full advantage of serial publication to select whatever episode he fancied and to turn it out in any meter he chose.

For example, his first ballad depicted the bath of Odysseus from *Odyssey* 19. This is the tense moment of recognition, when Eurykleia sees the telltale scar on Odysseus’ body.

1

A caldron bright the old woman bore,  
To wash the stranger’s feet;  
Of water cold she poured in store—  
Then, to temper the bath, she filled it o’er  
With a stream of boiling heat.

2

By the fire Odysseus took his place;  
But he quickly turned him round  
In the darksome shadow to hide his face,  
For he thought that his nurse’s hand would trace  
The scar of an ancient wound.

3

And he feared that she might with outcry rash  
his presence there betray;

And scarcely had she begun to wash,  
Ere she was aware of the grisly gash  
Above his knee that lay. (1850, 19)

Though Matthew Arnold felt Maginn's work suitable as independent poems, thinking of it as translation annoyed him. He felt he could never read those lines of Homer again, "without having the detestable dance" of Maginn's verses "jigging in my ears, to spoil the effect of Homer, and to torture me" (1960, 131). To apply such rhythms to Homer's scenes "is not to imitate Homer, but to travesty him," in Arnold's view, rightly perceiving the ludic quality of Maginn's style. We'll return to this ludic quality in a moment.

For further metrical variation, we might look to his twelfth poem in the original series, which translates Homer's description in *Odyssey* 4 of Helen's first appearance to Telemachus. The meter here is trochaic tetrameters, which Maginn assures us, are well established in medieval Latin hymns and English tradition.

From her perfumed chamber wending,  
Did the high-born Helen go:  
Artemis she seemed descending,  
Lady of the golden bow;  
Then Adrastra, bent on duty,  
Placed for her the regal chair;  
Carpet for the feet of beauty  
Spread Alcippe soft and fair. (1850, 283)

In retrospect, we can't help but hear the cadences of *Hiawatha* here, but Maginn's poem predates Longfellow's, which only appeared in 1855 and was still a relatively recent work when Newman set out to translate it into Latin.

Arnold's accusation of travesty hits on the puckish quality of the work but fails to fully comprehend Maginn's complex performance in these pieces. First, Maginn always published these ballads in *Fraser's* with a facing Greek text, openly inviting the reader to compare it word for word with Homer. This raised the stakes considerably, allowing the source text to openly expose the translator at any moment. Were these ballads meant only as travesties, such a gesture would hardly have been necessary. Maginn clearly wanted to perform his cheeky versions in a manner where the most informed and learned of his readers could see how closely he could dance on the Homeric text. His is a form of deep play. A reviewer for *The Torch* seemed to grasp Maginn's intention quite accurately: "we have another Homeric Ballad by Doctor Maginn—written with admirable fidelity *in a jocular vein*" (1.33 [Sat. April 7, 1838]: 260; my emphasis). The notion of "jocular fidelity" suits very well Maginn's poem "The Dog Argus," concerning Odysseus' faithful old hound.

3

To hunt the wild-goat, hart and hare,  
Him once young huntsmen sped;  
But now he lay an outcast there,  
Absent his lord, to none a care,  
Upon a dunghill bed.

4

Where store of dung, profusely flung  
By mules and oxen, lay;  
Before the gates it was spread along  
For the hinds to bear away,

As rich manure for lands they tilled  
 Of their prince beyond the sea;  
 There was Argus stretched, his flesh all filled  
 With the dog-worrying flea. (1850, 141)

Here, no doubt to the chagrin of a Matthew Arnold, we see Maginn positively wallowing in filth, managing to work dung into all three stanzas, and winding it up to the bathos of the poor dog's torment by "the dog-worrying flea." Moreover, we might see that Maginn has addressed Cowper's complaint about the difficulty of slaughtering an animal with dignity in English poetry by simply dispensing with the dignity. See the playful glee with which he translates a scene of slaughtering an ox from his first ballad:

They flay off its hide, they dress the inside  
 They cut it up joint by joint;  
 With skill well tried, the flesh they divide,  
 And, sliced into steaks, to the fire 'tis applied  
 Pierced on the toaster's point. (1850, 25)

From these observations, we can see the essential difference between Newman and Maginn: Newman seriously wished to impart an accurate view of Homer in all his faulty fullness to enlighten the unlearned and break up the monopoly on classical culture. But Maginn's audience is precisely the learned elite, those who do not need the translation, but are happy to use it to gauge the skill of Maginn's metrical jigs. For this reason, as I mentioned earlier, rather than travesty I term this *peacocking*, a show of linguistic skill that remains guarded by a protective irony.<sup>29</sup> We might also say it is not just ironic, but Byronic, if we consider Byron's use of the archaic form and

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<sup>29</sup> I am aware of the irony that Ennius supposedly had a dream in which Homer claimed to have reincarnated into a peacock.



diction of the Spenserian stanza in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, under which a winking subjectivity expressed itself to his contemporaries. It is telling that Maginn remained convinced that an *entire* translation of Homer would need to be done in the Spenserian stanza, and he even claimed he had begun one, but it was never found.<sup>30</sup> Instead, Philip Worsely and John Conington would complete the task of translating the *Iliad* into that complex meter in the 1860s.<sup>31</sup>

Homer's Greek text and Maginn's peacocking poetry are not all there is, however, to the *Homeric Ballads*. For these poems are crowned and edged with prose of a highly learned and pugnacious kind, as if to remind us that the author is *Dr. Maginn*. In long prose introductions and notes Maginn makes strenuous pronunciamientos and proclamations of his views, delving into textual criticism, comparative translation, and lexicographical quibbles. He drew criticism for his savaging of Philipp Buttmann's *Lexilogus*, a strange work to thrash in a magazine. Even his editor Conington had to admit that Maginn treated these matters "in what may be called a party spirit, grateful no doubt to the readers of a periodical, but proportionately distasteful to those for whom it possesses no such adventitious interest" (Maginn 1850, viii). But this comment underscores the nature of Maginn's serial performance: the poetry and the prose work together in a curious heteroglossia, speaking variously in the voices of Homer, a ludic balladeer, and an erudite Tory, much to the delight of the community of readers clustered around *Fraser's Magazine*. He was moving the obscure world of academic erudition into the bright arena of general circulation.

That Maginn found this kind of heteroglossic performance deeply fulfilling can be argued on the basis of two further documents: one from his literary debut with *Blackwood's Magazine* in

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<sup>30</sup> Conington comments in his introduction, "Dr Maginn indeed intimates that in his opinion 'the only metre in which the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as whole poems can be adequately translated into English is the Spenserian;' but the decision will scarcely be held valid unless there be made out a closer relation than most will admit to exist between the Tale of Troy Divine and the *Fairy Queen*" (Maginn 1850, xi-xii). Despite the proviso, Conington completed Worsely's project out of friendship (see note below).

<sup>31</sup> Worsely 1865; Conington 1868.

1819, the other from the very end of his life in 1842. To wow the editors at *Blackwood's*, Maginn submitted his translation of the first fite of the archetypal Ballad of Chevy Chase into accentual Latin stanzas, which were published with the English text alongside and a very cheeky introduction and footnotes. He cites Ennius proudly as the source for the word *taratantara* and debates the proper Latin for the surname Douglas. He claims to have also translated this into Greek, and provides a first stanza, with further claims that he is contemplating doing it in Hebrew. We see, then, that the ballad was a consistent target of Maginn's peacocking from the outset. But now let's turn to his deathbed performance. The final *Homeric Ballad* was published in *Fraser's* in 1842, with a preface by Edward Kenealy describing how it was finished by Maginn "in the golden sunlight of a summer's eve," on the Sunday before he died (1842, 439). Kenealy was visiting his sick friend, and they spoke of the many writers Maginn had known intimately. Finally, at one point, Maginn asked Kenealy to grab paper and ink to take dictation.

He then took Homer in his hand; and, after a brief interval of thought, dictated the latter part of the following ballad, evidently with no mental labour, but with an ease that could have resulted only from his intimacy with the Greek, and his extraordinary power of versification. When he had finished, I read for him the entire translation, and marked out the Greek for the printer. (1842, 439)

Kenealy thus sets the scene for Maginn's final performance, which is the usual heteroglossic amalgam of poetry and pugnacious prose. And it seems very Irish of him to have chosen Nestor's First Essay in Arms for his ballad, based on *Iliad* 11.670–761, a digression about a youthful cattle raid—was he thinking of the Cattle Raid of Cooley? He proudly rescued this tale from being a mere digression in the battle and made it his peacocking swan song.

A patient audience deserves a succinct conclusion, so here it is. The ballad Homer deserves our attention for the complex convergence it represents: a simultaneous reception of Greek epic

and early English poetry, a recalibration of classical literature to the level of folklore and popular culture, yet folklore construed by a literary establishment, not a popular front. In essence, it is an archival performance, ventriloquizing Homer through creative fakelore, the strange product of a comparative poetics that perhaps strains under the burden of three simultaneous temporalities. If Newman has a spiritual descendant, as I have said, it would be Psychoundakis, whose validating credential is his genuine immersion in Cretan folklore, and not a classical education (he translated from Modern Greek translations). But who is the heir to the ludic, transperipheral, heteroglossic sensibility of William Maginn? Perhaps we can find it in a work that also began in serialized form, appearing first in installments printed in a very Irish town called Chicago between 1918 and 1920. We know it today as James Joyce's *Ulysses*.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> On the continuities of a distinctly Irish classicism, see especially Gaynor 2008, 47–50.

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