

Translating poetry from Latin to Finnish and from Finnish into Latin

Erkki Palmén

PhD, University Lecturer Emeritus

Jyväskylä

My interest in translating poetry from one language into another arose in the mid-1960s when the traditional language of lyric poetry was subjected to severe criticism which had its beginnings in the previous decade. This criticism also touched the translators of classical poetry. Along with Teivas Oksala, my colleague since many years ago, I felt that the new situation was a challenge: was it really impossible to hit a happy mean in the translation of poetry so that the requirements of modernness would be taken into consideration but, on the other hand, the viable part of the old traditions could be preserved?

Since then we have frequently cooperated in translating Latin poetry into Finnish. As far as our working methods are concerned, I have mainly reconsidered the verses written by Teivas Oksala by trying to find expressions which would convey the original meaning more exactly. Sometimes, however, when an opportunity arises and I feel inspired, I also like to try my own wings. I believe that the content of the examples which I have chosen for this lecture will interest the listeners because they show that regardless of the temporal distance, modern people's way of thinking is, in many respects, surprisingly similar to that of people who lived in ancient Rome centuries ago.

Translating poetry from Finnish into Latin became a matter of special interest in summer 1986 when I had the honour of proof-reading the "Kalevala Latina" translated from Finnish into Latin by Prof. Tuomo Pekkanen. This translation has aroused well-deserved positive interest among friends of poetry both in Finland and abroad, since, in a skillful manner, it follows the rhythm of the original epic as well as its basic character in general. Less attention, so far, has been paid to "Carmina Sacra", Prof. Pekkanen's another translation of equally high quality, a collection of poems of the original "Helkavirret" by Eino Leino. In this book, the Finnish original and the Latin translation go side by side thus offering the reader a chance to compare them. I know some Latin enthusiasts abroad who have taken the opportunity to acquaint themselves with this outstanding example of Finnish literature.

I, for my part, have translated – mainly to order – the lyrics of some well-known songs into Latin. The Studio Choir of Jyväskylä (Jyväskylän Studiokuoro) has published a CD called "Classica dilecta Latine cantata" with a good selection of Finnish songs or songs translated into Finnish and now sung in the Latin language. In the last three years, the Latin version of "A Song to the Native Region" (Laulu synnyinseudulle), "Elogium regionis natalis" has been presented from the tower of the ridge of Jyväskylä on the evenings of the last week in August in honour of the "Athenis Finlandiae". Another CD to be published soon includes two Russian songs which I have translated into Latin. The last sample will be the poem "The Heirs of Aristoteles" (Aristoteleen perilliset) by Seija Tuohesmaa, which includes pointed criticism of modern Finnish politics. I will present this poem in Latin in the original metre of the Kalevala.

In addition, I will discuss some problems that a translator of poetry will have to tackle from time to time.