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The Sea! The Sea! The Shout of the Ten Thousand in the
Modern Imagination (review)

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With his left hand about his knees – the right
Held his beloved tortoise-lyre tight.

There he lay innocent as a new-born child,
As gossips say but though he was a God,
The Goddess, his fair mother, unbeguiled,
Knew all that he had done being abroad:
'Whence come you, and from what adventure wild,
You cunning rogue, and where have you abode
All the long night, clothed in your impudence?
What have you done since you departed hence?

'Apollo will soon pass within this gate
And bind your tender body in a chain
Inextricably tight, and fast as fate,
Unless you can delude the God again,
Even when within his arms – ah, runagate!
A pretty torment both for Gods and Men
Your father made when he made you!' – 'Dear mother,'
Replied sly Hermes, 'wherefore scold and bother?

'As if I were like other babes as old,
And understood nothing of what is what;
And cared at all to hear my mother scold.
I in my subtle brain a scheme have got,
Which whilst the sacred stars round Heaven are rolled
Will profit you and me – nor shall our lot
Be as you counsel, without gifts or food,
To spend our lives in this obscure abode.'

The closer proximity of Rayer's version to the literal meaning of the Greek will no doubt make it a first choice for Classics in Translation courses. But readers who wish to see 'Homer's' subtly nuanced play of mutual divine deception reborn in exquisitely nuanced and harmonious English verse will surely feel that Shelley's translation operates at an altogether different level of poetic (re)creativity.

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The Sea! The Sea! The Shout of the Ten Thousand in the Modern Imagination.
By Tim Rood. London: Duckworth, 2004. Pp. ix + 262. Hb. £25.

'Many who have echoed Xenophon's shout', Tim Rood writes, 'have, it seems, simply been fond of the sound of "Thalatta! Thalatta!".' The appeal of the Greek words enters this book as a story about translation,

and its absence. *The Sea! The Sea!* is a translation of the shout supposedly uttered by an army of Greek soldiers (the ‘Ten Thousand’) in 400 B.C., when they first caught sight of the Black Sea after a long march home starting in Mesopotamia, and immortalized by Xenophon’s work of history, the *Anabasis*. Yet Rood’s book makes it clear from the start that the phrase has not only lived on in translation. It opens with a quotation from Joyce’s *Ulysses* which asserts the importance of using the original Greek: ‘God, he said quietly. Isn’t the sea what Algy calls it: a great sweet mother? The snotgreen sea. The scrotumtightening sea. *Epi oinopa ponton*. Ah, Dedalus, the Greeks. I must teach you. You must read them in the original. *Thalatta! Thalatta!* She is our great sweet mother. Come and look.’ But then a jump to the end of the book shows that *Thalatta! Thalatta!* (or *Thalassa! Thalassa!* – variation between Attic and Doric is acceptable, but the double form is essential in the shout’s later history) has not always been read, let alone quoted, in the original. Rood cites the Byzantinist Anthony Bryer writing: ‘now that English schoolboys have abandoned Xenophon, Pontic Turkish write to me about “Ksenophon.” Presumably no shout like “Thalassa! Thalassa!” breaks from their lips, but “The Sea! The Sea!” is still going on.’

There are many ways in which one could read this rich and informative study, and the focus I shall adopt on translation provides only one of them. Yet the vicissitudes of translation (and its absence) provide an entry point for discussing the various themes raised by the expression’s afterlife: the ways in which a past text becomes a ‘classic’ that is supposed to survive intact through the ages; the changing conceptions of the classicity of the *Anabasis*; the role of educational and institutional structures in sustaining a text’s continuing significance; the conflicting forces involved in the canonization of a classic; the variety of literary and artistic forms through which these forces operate; the broader ethical and political questions involved in the process of creating and appropriating a classic.

The book’s starting and finishing points are appeals to translation, yet both make an appeal also to a translation’s counterpart, the source text. Rood’s first chapter presents and contextualizes Xenophon’s own description of the scene at the Black Sea in the *Anabasis*. The last chapter returns to the *Anabasis* to explain how Xenophon’s story, as Rood observes, ‘was like that of the Grand Old Duke of York – with a twist’. The ‘Ten Thousand’ were Greek mercenaries hired by Cyrus, a Persian prince. Cyrus marched them up into the Persian empire, and Xenophon marched them down again. But there was a twist, or, more accurately, many twists: Cyrus had many more than 10,000 men; Xenophon was just one among many leaders; and the many ten

thousands were at first not a united force, but multiple contingents. Most significantly, the march itself did not end at the glorious point of encountering the sea, and the next day revealed a gloomy picture contrasting with the shining moment of the shout. The Ten Thousand did return to Greece, but there they found themselves as much at a loss as at the start of their journey: the political confusion they encountered when they crossed the Bosphorus left them isolated and without support. An escape story that began as a eulogy of the Greek achievement subverts itself by exposing Greek weakness.

But the later history of *Thalatta! Thalatta!*, removed as it was from Xenophon's main narrative, erased this subversion. And the temporal span of this later history shows a further erasure, linked not to the *Anabasis* itself, but the reception of the ancient text. What in the nineteenth century came to be seen as a 'classic' moment, paradigmatic for adventure stories, had in reality been of marginal significance to previous periods, including antiquity. Thus, despite modern appeals to the text's supposed immortality, it was only in the modern imagination and only by means of rewriting the shout in modern terms that *Thalatta! Thalatta!* acquired 'classic' status.

This rewriting took place even when the Greek phrase remained untranslated. One may say that it took place *par excellence* through the absence of translation. When Defoe writes in *Captain Singleton* that the sailors 'cry'd out the *Sea! the Sea!*', Rood questions the possibility of any allusion to Xenophon. Only the Greek would have clinched it. Defoe's sailors also shout 'A sail! A sail!', a phrase with allusive potential only when later repeated by Byron, Coleridge, or Tennyson. Closest of all to the moment in Xenophon, writes Rood, was perhaps Columbus' shout of 'Tierra! Tierra! Land! Land!' at his first sight of the New World. Readers would recall Columbus when they came to Xenophon's climatic scene.

Sometimes the Greek and English are quoted together. Sometimes the allusion is unmistakable even when the Greek is not quoted: an early translator of *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* rendered Verne's 'La mer!' by 'The sea – the sea.' In the long nineteenth century, as a climax of both fictional and real adventure stories, the phrase tended to remain untranslated. It was in this form that it became the inevitable shout of adventurers and soldiers, especially those who found themselves involved in an 'eastern adventure'. It was, in fact, so firmly embedded in these stories that its absence provoked curiosity and wonder, as when, in 1918, a group of British soldiers trapped in the reaches of the Taurus mountains got their first view of the sea after a march of many hundreds of miles and failed to echo the two words: 'no shout like the 'Thalassa!'

Thalassa! of Xenophon's Ten Thousand broke from the lips of our little band', wrote two of the group's officers. Unsurprisingly, Rood links the embeddedness of the words in the English imagination to the classical orientation of the Victorian educational system and its use of the *Anabasis* as an easy-to-translate, but also 'safe', text. The story was read as promoting the virtues of manliness, courage, nobility, and self-control.

But this was not the sole prerogative of the English, or even those who knew Greek. While travelling to the north in 1893, the Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen 'misquoted' Xenophon: 'Perhaps we can soon celebrate with the classic greeting Tallata Tallata. Don't know if it's written correctly, but what the hell.' Even girls, though less likely to learn Greek, could manage *Thalatta! Thalatta!*, and some extended the resonance of the phrase beyond adventure stories. In Mrs Baillie Reynolds' *Thalassa!* (1906) and in Mary MacHugh's memoir *Thalassa: A Story of Childhood by the Western Wave* (1931), Xenophon's cry is associated with the memory of lost youth. Heine's *North Sea* cycle blends the imagination of the Greek warrior and the dream of childhood: 'Thalatta! Thalatta! / Greetings to you, o eternal sea!'. Xenophon's phrase, Rood tells us, as well as symbolizing the power of God and the immortality of the soul, offered the promise of moral and even sexual liberation. *Thalatta! Thalatta!* also became 'English', and a support for England's identification of herself as a maritime and imperial power on a level with Athens: "The Sea, the Sea," sings the Englishman – "Θάλασσα, Θάλασσα," shouted the old Greeks', wrote a reviewer in the *Dublin University Magazine* in 1855. Haydon's famous painting of 1832, *Xenophon and the Ten Thousand on First Seeing the Sea from the Mount Theches*, brings together these strands, detached from any accidents of language. It gets a chapter to itself.

"Thalassa" (or ... "Thalatta"), says a character in Rose Macaulay's 1956 novel *The Towers of Trebizond*, parodying 'scholarly' discrimination of Attic and Doric. Thalassa or Thalatta? Ronald Knox, asked which, answered 'the latter'. 'The latter! The latter!' added Joyce, and the pun quickly transformed itself into the wordplays of *Finnegans Wake*: 'The letter! The litter!'; 'ye seal that lubs you lassers, Thallassee'; 'kolassa! kolassa'; 'Galata! Galata'; 'tha lassy! tha lassy!' Xenophon's shout endures ironically and parodically in the modernist imagination, in Joyce, in Brian Moore, or in Louis MacNeice.

The book concludes by evoking the vexed relationship between translation, both in the strict and the broad sense of the term, and source text. Rood is able to identify the silences, manipulations, and adaptations involved in a 'classic' text's afterlife. He excludes no one,

not Xenophon nor himself, from the antinomies of writing, reading, and interpretation, whose interlinking allows no certainty as to the boundaries between source text and translation. The book's last chapter invites us to question both the triumphant narrative closure apparently implied by Xenophon's shout and Rood's division between Victorian and Edwardian readers for whom *Thalatta* was a fairly simple, unproblematic symbol, and on the other hand the unsettling irony of modernist texts. Rood ends up by suggesting that neither were the Victorians ignorant of the power of irony, nor could the modernists fully repudiate the compelling burden of the 'classical' past. How we read '*Thalatta! Thalatta!*', the book aptly concludes, is a question that is profoundly political, and politics cannot escape the contradictory forces that shape its history.

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Virgil's Georgics: A New Verse Translation. By Janet Lembke. Pp. xxiv + 114. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. Hb. \$23.

All the not inconsiderable resources of Yale University Press have been mustered to produce Janet Lembke's new verse translation of Virgil's *Georgics*. Appearing in the 'Yale New Classics' series, it comes complete with an elegant paper cover wrapped around its case binding, and some of the most austere beautiful typographic design, inside and out, that I have ever seen. From the line art of a wheelbarrow on its title page, to the luxurious choice of text sheet, this is a production to marvel at and display with pride on one's bookshelf – where, however, it will probably languish after a single perusal.

If so, it will not be because of incidental errors, but what could such eminences as the 'Kingsley Trust Association Publication Fund established by the Scroll and Key Society of Yale College', which contributed an unspecified subvention, have been thinking when they decided to jettison the invaluable aid of a copy editor and proofreader? Lembke's Introduction gets off to a horrific start on the very first page, with a birth date for one 'Publius Vergilius Naso'. Ovid must have been on her mind, but have we reached such a pass that no one in Yale's editorial department could be expected to catch such an error? Lembke's 'Translator's Note' continued to give me a sense of foreboding as I read that Virgil's 'practices ... tribes ... lands, and ... many place-names are foreign indeed, in many cases striking no contemporary resonance'. It does not take much prescience to see where this disheartening attitude will lead any translator. In an attempt 'to bridge