TRANSLATING RACINE'S *PHÈDRE*

William Packard's alexandrine translation of Racine's *Pbedre* has received wide acclaim; the American production opened offBroadway on February 10, 1966, at the Greenwich Mews Theatre, starring Beatrice Straight and Mildred Dunnock.

The Institute for Advanced Studies in the Theatre Arts (IASTA) had already presented three masterpieces of the French theatre: Richard Wilbur's translation of Molière's *The Misanthrope,* directed by Jacques Charon, Sociétaire of the Comédie-Frangaise; W. S. "Merwin's translation of Marivaux's *The False Confessions,* directed by Robert Manuel, of the Comédie-Française; and the world premiere of Richard Wilbur's translation of Molière's *Tartuffe.* And so it was natural that IASTA should eventually turn its attention to the great 17th century crown of the French neo-classic theatre, Kacine's *Phèdre.*

And it was natural that the Institute should seek to obtain the Services of Paul Émile Deiber, Sociétaire of the Comédie-Française, to stage this most difficult play. For M. Deiber himself had played opposite Marie Bell in *Phèdre,* first in the role of Hippolyte, and later in the role of Theseus. As distinguished a director as an actor for the Comèdie, Deiber is the producer of all recordings of the classics which are issued by the Comédie-Française.

When IASTA first talked with Deiber •bout the possibility of his coming to New York to direct an American production of *Phedre,* the problem of an appropriate English translation came up. Now, there are some excellent translations of *Phèdre—most* notably, those by Wallace Fowlie, Robert Lowell, Robert Henderson, Kenneth Muir and John Cairncross. However, most of these translations are in rhymed pentameter —and none of them attempts to recreate the structure and rhythms of the French alexandrine line. Deiber insisted that the essence of Racine is to be found in this double, sweeping alexandrine line of the neo-classic theatre; only in the alexandrine could the "metronome" of Racine's poetry be realized. But there was no such alexandrine translation in the English language.

When IASTA offered me a commission to attempt the translation, I knew it was going to be an incredibly difficult undertaking. It is not as if the alexandrine line had never been used in English literature; it has, and sometimes to great effect. But it is not in our pulse, the way Shakespeare's blank verse line is in our pulse. Just as the Italians have their terza rima, and the Japan*** have their 17-syllable haiku, so the French have their alexandrine and the English hare their pentameter; it is the unique expression of a civilization, and it cannot really be accounted for.

To be sure, Spenser used the alexandrine line in *The Faerie Queene*—with nine lin— to a stanza; the first eight are pentameter, and the ninth is an alexandrine:

But *it in shape and beautie did* excel/
All other idoles which the heath'en adore,
Farre passing that, which by surpassing skill
Phidias did make in Paphos isle ot yore,
With which that wretched Greeke, that life forlore,
Did tall in love: yet this much fairer whined,
But covered with a slender veile afore:
And both her teete and legs together twyned
Were with a snake, whose head and tail were fast combyned.

This becomes the famous Spenserian stanza, and is used by Keats in -*The Eve of St. Agnes:*

St. Agnes' Eve—ah, bitter chill it was.'
The owl, tor all his feathers, was ocold.
The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass,
And silent was the Hock in woolly fold.
Numb were the Beadsman's fingers while he told
His rosary, and while his frosted breath
Like pious incense from a censer old,
Seemed taking flight trom heaven without a death,

Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith.

Dryden, also, makes use of the alexandrine, to extend a regular pentameter couplet:

Thy gen'rous Fruits, though gather'd ere their prime,
Still shew'd a Quickness; and maturing Time
But mellows what we write to the dull Sweets ot Rhyme.

But it is just this sort of elongated ending of a couplet, which Alexander Pope sought to ridicule, in an inimitable satire:

A needless alexandrine ends the song
That, like a wounded snake, drags its alow length along.

Some modern poets have used the alexandrine; thus the opening lines in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson are:*

Awake ye muses nine, sing me a strain divine,
Unwind the solemn twine, and tie my ratentine!

And Robert Bridges refers to "my loose alexandrines," such as the following line: "in the life of Reason to the wisdom of God."

Now, it is easy enough to set down the conventions of the alexandrine line. It must be hexameter, composed of six feet; and as it is used in the neo-classic French theatre, there must be a division in the line, so that there are two equal hemistichs of three feet each. This division is known as the absolute caesura, and it is to be used as a unit of measurement for the breath of the actor.

This can be seen very clearly, in the opening lines of *Phèdre:*

Le dessein en est pris: je pars, cher Théramène,
Et quitte le sejour de Paimable Trésene.
Dans le doute mortal dont je suis agité,
Je commence à rougir de mon oisiveié.

In the first line, there is a complete break after the word *pris:* this is the caesura. However, in the second line, although there is a metrical pause, it is not so pronounced, and the actor may choose to deal with the entire line as one unit In my translation, I tried to retain the same principle of a metrical pause, in the following manner:

7 have *made up my mind: 1 go, dear Théramène,*
and leave the loveliness of staying in Trésène.
Each day 1 have new doubts, they drive me to distress,
and 1 must blush with shame to see my idleness.

Now, there is a further convention of the alexandrine line—Chat there must be no enjambement, or spiling over of the sense of a sentence, from one line to another. F our purposes, it is convenient to think * the heroic couplet, as it it used by Alexander Pope:

Hope springs eternal in the human breast:
Man never is, but always to be bless'd:
•The soul, uneasy and confined from home,
Rests and expatiates in a life to come.

Here the first two lines are entirely self-enclosed: the last two lines separate the subject and predicates, but do so in a way that is clearly indicated by the punctuation; and there would never be a separation of subject and predicate, beyond the second rhyme of a couplet.

Furthermore, the idea and imagery are enclosed within each couplet. The effect of this is a series of beautifully wrought units, whose connection is not so much rhetorical as it is musical. This is in sharp contrast to the poetry of Shakespeare. In Elizabethan blank verse, there will be a great many extended figures of speech, through several lines of text; as, for example:

And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, hors'd
Upon the sightless couriers ot the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind.

These extended figures accumulate their power through a development over several lines of verse. But in Racine, this will rarely happen. At most, we will be- given a single simple image, it will be realized within the couplet, and then it will be dismissed; for example:

Je voulais en *rriourant prendre soin de ina gloire,*
1£t dérober an' jour one *Hamate si* no/re". , - ——— — ,

— Here *Banaae* is introduced as a simple page, it is perfectly realized within the figure, and then it is dismissed—althqngh it will certainly reur as a simple image, perhaps in a following scene, in another couplet.

We can see that there is a profound difference in these two approaches to poetry. The first approach achieves its force through accumulation and development of imagery; the second approach implies its power through simple statement and a pattern of recurrences. The first approach is more rhetorical; the second approach is more mathematical. It is like the difference between Brahms and Mozart.

Now aside from the technical problem of the alexandrine line, and its conventions of rhyme and imagery, there is also the more general problem of finding an English equivalent for the special quality of Racine's style. Surely one outstanding characteristic of Racine is lucidity; by that I mean, his diction has crystal clarity, an absolute simplicity of vocabulary, and an elemental, heightened awareness of the word as a unit of speech. Thus certain words will almost take on the characteristic of being "ciphers"—words such as *flamme,* cacher, *lunette, rough*—these will all have a very special meaning within the context of *Phèdre.*

Finally, Racine's style seems to consist of a polished surface, a *politesse* which belies a subtext of violent repression, incest and alienation. It is all some sort of advanced algebra of the heart. Jean-Louis Jarrault, writing about *Phèdre,* compares tiie style with a chandelier—because it is luminous, crystalline, complicated, circular and symmetrical. I tried to achieve as much of this style as possible, in my translation.

I did take one great liberty. I allowed there to be a mixture of French and anglicized Greek pronunciations; this is because I frankly preferred the French proper names—Phèdre seems to me to be much more poetic than "Phaedra." Thus "Théramène" and "Aricie" are French, whereas the more familiar "Theseus" and "Icarus" must remain Greek. It was my hope that once one became accustomed to these combinations, they would not seem unnatural.

Of course. I tried to retain the literal meaning of Racine in every line, and in some cases I even tried to reproduce the French syntax and sentence structure. And yet, I cared very much that my translation should be the identical length as Racine's original—and so the English text has exactly the same number of lines (1654).

When the translation was completed, everyone associated with the production was eager to see the reaction of the American actors, to the alexandrine line. The IASTA company of *Phèdre* included such distinguished American artists'tfs Beatrice Straight and Mildred Dunnock, in th# roles of Phèdre and Oenone. And generally, the company accepted this new rhythm without vary much difficulty. Take for example this ^ssage frem the second act: Hippolyte is ionfessing his love to Aricie—

Moi, vous hair, Madame?
Avec quelques coulers *qu'on ait peint ma tierté,*
Croit-on que dans ses flancs un monstre *m'ait porte?*
Quelles sauvages moeurs, *quelle haine endurcie*
Pourrait, en *vous voyant, n'e'tie point adoucie?*
Ai-je pu résister au charme decevant . . .

My translation is as follows:

Madam, could I hate you?
No matter what they say or how they paint my pride,
do they suppose some beast once carried me inside?
What mind that is unkind, what heart that may be hard,
in viewing you, would not grow soft in its regard?
Could any man resist the charm of what you are?

Michael Durrell, who played the part of Hippolyte, commented on these lines:

> Generally, memorization was exceedingly less of a problem, throughout the text, with the alexandrines. The rhymes provided a lead into the next line; and so the thoughts seem to come out of one another, automatically, so an actor can go into the next line without thinking about it.
>
> During the rehearsal period. I reached my peak of irritation at home, when I was fighting the lines—I couldn't understand what the translator had done, how the lines had been put together. But then I stopped fighting, and when I allowed the rhythms of the language to happen, suddenly the alexandrine rhythm began to take over, even with all our hard choppy English.
>
> I found the hemistich of great value. Within the knowledge of the caesura, the actor can vary the intensity, yolume and meaning of the line, according to his own choice. It becomes a blend of poetic technique and the actor's own craft.
>
> Breathing has been an enormous problem for me. This experience has made me realize that we are not properly trained, in the American theatre, to breathe correctly, and to know how to use the playwright's punctuation——the comma, the semi-colon, and the colon. And so it all becomes a matter of plotting and planning, to find the appropriate breath-pause in each line.
>
> But then, of course, the same thing should apply to blank verse, shouldn't it? Because a breath-pause is a change of emotion, a change of pace, whatever the actor's choice determines it to be.
>
> I suppose it doesn't make much difference, then, whether one is working with ten syllables or twelve syllables; and if the actor can find the reality of a line, he can use twenty syllables.

The other American actors were able to handle the alexandrine as readily, although perhaps they may not have been as aware as Durrell was, of the importance of plotting the caesuras before seeking to impose on interpretation on the lines. Perhaps one factor which was operating in favor of the production, was the absence in the American theatre, of any tradition whatsoever, which might have served as a guide for the use of alexandrine lines. There is no "cliche" way for American to do these alexandrines, as there is a "cliche" way for them to do blank verse; one can always imitate Gielgud or Olivier or the Old Vic, and bluff one's way through Shakespeare; but who is there to imitate, in speaking alexandrines? The Americans were on their own, entirely.

Perhaps the best advice that has ever been given on this matter, was given by Paul Valéry, in his essay "On Speaking Verse," in which he advises actors on the correct approach to an alexandrine text:

> First of all, get used to the melody of these lines; study closely, the structure of these doubly organized sentences in which the syntax on one hand and the prosody on the other compose a sonorous, spiritual substance and cunningly engender a form full of life.

Valéry goes on to stress the rhythm of the lines as something quite apart from the meaning. He cautions the actors not to be overly concerned with individual words, or with interpretation, or with character—that will come of its own accord. What is most important, is the musical form, the rhythm of thought, the sweep' of the lines. One must come to terms with the melody of the whole piece, before the separate parts can attain their true dignity and distinction.

The final test of the production itself, however, must rest with the audiences. The director Paul-Émile Deiber, who had worked with American company so intensively, expressed satisfaction at the end of a grueling and exhaustive rehearsal period, commenting on his own idea of Racine:

> "The Royalty of Language", the title of a chapter from a work of Thierry Maulnier devoted to Racine, seems to me to be the key to the true interpretation of *Phèdre.*
>
> It seems impossible to substitute the language of Shakespeare for the language of Racine. To this impossibility, however, the poet, William Packard, addressed himself, and he deserves much credit for retaining the spirit of Racine while preserving the difficult, but absolutely necessary alexandrine rhythm. And is it not this rhythm which pounds in the hearts of heroes? All our American actors felt it, and all of them tried to arrive at the sublime poetry inherent in it But by what means? Simply, by means of the "perfect actor'—simply by a synthesis of the three actions: verbal, physical, and interior. Our goal had to be the true music of Racine's art. It takes great ambition to do a great play, but then Racine lives by the nobility of his style, by the inexorable rhythm which is singularly his. The love of the actors was equal to this challenge, and it led them to the discovery of this most French of poets.
>
> It is my hope that our professional colleagues through this production may discover the rhythms and passions of the world of Racine where ". . . *tout n'est qu'ordre et beaute'. . ."* (BAUDELAIRE)

In many ways, this production of *Phèdre* was an innovation. It subjected New York professional actors to the rigorous control and discipline of the 17th century French theatre of Racine; they had to learn the rigidity of the body in this careful, classical style; and they had to adjust their speech to the conventions of the alexandrine line. But they proved decisively that English alexandrines are possible in our theatre, and by so doing they may have affected the course of translation in the future. Now there is really no reason why the plays of Corneille. Racine and Moliere cannot be written in the same meter as the original French text.

WILLIAM PACKARD
New York, N.Y.