

## Books

### Found in Translation

*Jeremy Coleman is impressed by a new English translation of the 'Ring' poem by a leading British Wagner scholar*

Richard Wagner, *The Ring of the Nibelung*, translated and edited with an introduction by John Deathridge (London: Penguin Classics, 2018). 816 pp. £25. ISBN: 978-0-241-30585-0

The task of the literary translator is usually framed around the notion of 'fidelity' to the source text. Whatever the translator is trying to be faithful *to* (which is another question), any betrayal of the original, according to this logic, is deemed a failure. Or, as the Italian motto has it, *traduttore traditore*. The translator Mark Polizzotti has recently challenged this view in his radical 'manifesto' *Sympathy for the Traitor*. 'A good translation', he contends, 'offers not a reproduction of the work but an interpretation, a re-representation, just as the performance of a play or a sonata is a representation of the script or the score, one among many possible representations'.<sup>1</sup> Polizzotti's proposals may partly explain the approach taken by John Deathridge in his superb new English translation of Wagner's *Ring* poem. Deathridge is the latest in a long line of previous attempts of varying degree of critical success at rendering the *Ring* in English, beginning with that of Alfred Forman in the 1870s.<sup>2</sup> In Deathridge's edition, which consists of the German text and the English translation in parallel on facing pages, he claims to eschew any 'overzealous fealty to the original' (p. xxxvii) which has allegedly compromised most previous efforts.

As a work of literature in its own right, the *Ring* has yet to acquire a high reputation and its very appearance in the Penguin Classics series is something of a provocation. Its literary quality remains doubtful for many who detect in it more than a whiff of pretentious dilettantism and a lack of poetic decorum. If it has remained a strangely neglected text, this may be largely due to its chronic circulation via old-fashioned, inaccurate translations – hence the urgent need for a new one. For Deathridge, encouraged by Nietzsche's paean to the poem in 'Richard Wagner in Bayreuth' (1876), Wagner's *Ring* is quite simply 'one of the greatest texts ever written for the lyric stage' (p. xiii). The critical success of Deathridge's translation is owed in large part to his own skill as a writer, in addition to his superlative command of Wagner scholarship. In an obvious sense, the piquant and often-surprising word choices galvanise the poem, bringing it to life and replicating something of the dramatically vivid effect, energy and 'presence' of the original.

<sup>1</sup> Mark Polizzotti, *Sympathy for the Traitor: A Translation Manifesto* (Cambridge, MA, 2018), 53. Quoted in Marina Warner, 'The Politics of Translation', in *London Review of Books*, xl/19 (11 Oct. 2018), 21–4, here 21.

<sup>2</sup> Deathridge acknowledges some of these (pp. xxxvi–vii, 748–9) but none of the previous English translations of the *Ring* is actually cited in footnotes or a bibliography.

This impression on the reader is also a by-product of Deathridge's particular approach to translation: his solutions are constantly inventive, rarely satisfied with a word-for-word equivalent. This is a translation that, among other things, puts the English language to the test.

As Deathridge states in a wide-ranging Introduction,<sup>3</sup> the aim of his translation was to 'make it as close as [he] could for the reader to grasp the sheer verve of this magnificent epic tale' (p. xxxvii). The translation, he adds, is intended 'for reading, not singing' (p. xiii).<sup>4</sup> The distinction between translation 'for reading' and 'for singing' is warranted by Wagner's own evaluation of his 'poems' (*Dichtungen*) as independent literary objects, rather than as traditional operatic libretti which tended to serve as mere accessories to a staged performance ('Beyond Reading', pp. xvi–xvii).<sup>5</sup> However, Deathridge has constructed the text not from, say, the *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen* (1872), but from the text as it appears in the *Sämtliche Werke* edition of the scores. After all, the latter may represent the most complete version of the poem given that Wagner altered it so often that it never really attained a definitive, stable form (p. xxxiv).

One of the most valuable features of Deathridge's edition is his decision to include many of the illuminating performance directions concerning expression and interpretation amassed from all the available sources, namely from the editions of the scores themselves as well as from further remarks of Wagner's recorded by colleagues during rehearsals for the first full *Ring* cycle at Bayreuth in 1876 (pp. xxxiv–v). Many of Wagner's remarks on performance pertain both to musical and dramatic interpretation, not least his asseverations on tempo.<sup>6</sup> There are repeated warnings, especially in connection with *The Rhinegold*, against slow tempi and indulgent sentimentality on the part of the players, singers and conductor, for example: 'All the following dialogue with particular avoidance of any kind of dragging! "If you weren't such boring numbskulls, 'Rhinegold' would be over within two hours"' (p. 37).<sup>7</sup> Some readers will conceivably find such remarks a distraction from the immediacy of the reading experience or might draw a firm distinction somewhere between the 'work' and any one interpretation or production of it. For others, the performance markings may help to simulate a kind of audio-visual hallucination of the cor-

<sup>3</sup> There is minimal overlap between this Introduction to the translation and the chapters on the *Ring* in his essay collection *Wagner Beyond Good and Evil* (Los Angeles and Berkeley, 2008). One of the highlights in the Introduction is Deathridge's account of the way Wagner used the four elements (water, fire, air and earth), taken from Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie*, as a means of structuring the entire cycle in a palindrome (p. xxix).

<sup>4</sup> In the Acknowledgements, Deathridge compares these two approaches with particular reference to the example of Andrew Porter's sung translation of the *Ring*. Ultimately, he concedes the greater difficulty of the latter: 'especially in texts as complex as Wagner's, more is lost in translation if one remains faithful to the inflexions of the original musical setting than if one does not' (p. 749).

<sup>5</sup> In his analysis of these categories, Deathridge couches Wagner's music-theatrical innovations implicitly in terms of post-structuralist theories of language and media theory.

<sup>6</sup> See also his 1869 article 'Über das Dirigieren', tr. by Robert L. Jacobs, 'On Conducting', in *Three Wagner Essays* (London, 1979), 47–93.

<sup>7</sup> Another example in *The Rhinegold*, Scene 4: 'everything to continue in strict tempo. Absolutely no sentimental dawdling!' (p. 127). By the way, there is a small typographical error in the German text of this last remark: 'Ja kein sentimentales [sic] Zurückhalten!' (p. 126). I have followed Deathridge in placing all scenic descriptions and performance directions in italics.

responding musical score and dramatic action. The performance directions also indicate the 'tempo' of the poem independently of its actual musical setting, one that may change from moment to moment according to the dramatic content.

There is a vigorous earthiness and lyrical economy about the idiom of the translation overall. The dialogue also manages to shift between various tonal registers reflecting the emotional extremes of the poem: colloquial, raunchy, brutal, colourful, funny. The reliance on Anglo-Saxon vocabulary and etymology helps. For example, the verb 'get' is frequently used for imperative commands. On just one page, selected almost at random, Alberich barks his orders: 'Get lost, you layabout!', 'Get cracking!', 'Get me gold/ from the new shafts!' (p. 91). Alberich is clearly fond of slang ('You there, on your pins!' [p. 91], 'You smart alecks!' [p. 103]) and occasionally there are hints of Americanisms and even clichés of Hollywood cinema: 'Dead easy' (p. 65), 'Cut the smooth talk!' (p. 75), 'Now get the hell out!' (p. 111). It is almost as if the drama were being filtered through the lens of so many film genres – thriller, crime, war, film noir, melodrama, with hints of Quentin Tarantino.

Deathridge is upfront about his decision 'to resist, in most but not all cases, Wagner's penchant for the archaic' (p. xxxvi). There may indeed be no gain in finding equivalent Old Anglo-Saxon terms whose only purpose would be to baffle readers of the English translation anyway. Yet Wagner's 'love affair with the archaic', as Deathridge puts it (p. xxvii), is an important feature of the original left unaccounted for in his translation, and it would have been instructive to see that element mixed with the more modern idiom. In his introduction to the 1991 expanded edition of *The Family Letters of Richard Wagner*, Deathridge gave cogent reasons for retaining William Ashton Ellis' imperfect Victorian translations of Wagner's correspondence: 'the translations are closer in time to the original and capture a part of the historical "aura" of the texts that a modern translation never could'.<sup>8</sup> In his 2018 translation of the *Ring*, the historical 'aura' of the work has evidently been banished in favour of sheer dramatic impact and modern relevance. The difference is not simply that between correspondence and prose writings, on the one hand, and dramatic poetry, on the other. The version of the German text of the *Ring* omits all cuts and alternative versions (e.g. of the ending), and while one might agree with Wagner's ultimate choice of text, its construction in this edition lends the work an ahistorical appearance, covering over as it does the revisions that Wagner made to the poem over the twenty-three years since its first publication in 1853.<sup>9</sup>

Wagner's use of *Stabreim* is wisely abandoned in Deathridge's translation wherever it is liable to impede the basic sense. Yet he retains alliterative rhymes in crucial passages, such as the opening of *Siegfried* Act I Scene 3 (pp. 386–7), and makes the most of introducing alliteration where there is no direct equivalent in the original: 'spick and span, finished today' (p. 341), 'Piggish pack of hoodlums', (p. 109), 'scoundrel of a skinflint' (p. 459). Most previous English versions have been concerned with reproducing stylistic and idiomatic features of Wagner's poem. What sets Deathridge's translation apart in some

<sup>8</sup> Richard Wagner, *The Family Letters of Richard Wagner*, translated by William Ashton Ellis. Enlarged edition with introduction and notes by John Deathridge (London, 1991), xlv.

<sup>9</sup> In this respect at least, Stewart Spencer's translation remains unsurpassed: Spencer usefully provided in an Appendix the German texts of the various rejected versions and translations for each. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington, *Wagner's 'Ring of the Nibelung': A Companion* (London, 1993), 352–63.

ways is the dramatically conscious accuracy with which he decodes on almost every page meanings and allusions in the poem which in previous translations have been only approximated, if not misunderstood and obscured.

Deathridge has fun with the cycle's intricate musical structures too. One example is the Rhinedaughters' hymn of praise to the gold ('Heiajaheia!') which Wagner disposed in symmetrical form both poetically and musically, a feature that Deathridge highlights further by employing the same word 'bliss' to bookend the central section:

Heiajaheia!  
 Heiajaheia!  
 Wallalalalala leiajahei!  
 Rhinegold!  
 Rhinegold!  
 Radiant **bliss**,  
 how bright and regal your smile!  
 [... 11 lines omitted here]  
 dancing and singing,  
 diving and bathing in **bliss**!  
 Rhinegold!  
 Rhinegold!  
 Heiajaheia!  
 Heiajaheia!  
 Wallalalalalaleia jahei! (p. 25, emphasis added).

There is no equivalent symmetry in the original, and the parallelism stands out on the page.

What are the implications for performances of the *Ring* today? The accumulation of sheer data regarding how the work may be most effectively interpreted arguably adds to the already weighty burden placed on performers and directors, as if the task of staging Wagner were not demanding enough. On the other hand, it may be that new interpretative possibilities are afforded once aspects of this notoriously complex text are made a bit clearer. In any case, Deathridge's translation is a virtuosic performance in its own right and a timely reinterpretation of what is probably Wagner's greatest literary achievement. Despite its omissions, this volume provides the most up-to-date, and probably the closest thing we have to a definitive, German text of the *Ring*, and a thrilling new English translation complete with stage directions and notes towards performance and interpretation. It may easily provide the basis for future appreciation, study and transdisciplinary scholarship, as well as stage productions, surtitles, dramatic readings<sup>10</sup> and, dare I say, film adaptations.

<sup>10</sup> Wagner delivered private readings of the poems including the *Ring* in what were by all accounts intensely dramatic performances. The London pianist and critic Eduard Dannreuther, himself one of the first translators of Wagner's prose writings in English, described these one-man recitals as 'Bayreuth in miniature'. Dannreuther's words are quoted by an anonymous writer in 'Eduard Dannreuther', *Musical Times*, xxxix (1898), 645–54, here 652; this source is quoted and discussed in David Trippett, 'Bayreuth in Miniature: Wagner and the Melodramatic Voice', *Musical Quarterly*, xcv (2012), 71–138, here 73.