

PHILIP GASKELL

Landmarks in European Literature



WUHAN UNIVERSITY PRESS

武汉大学出版社



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EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY PRESS

爱丁堡大学出版社



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图书在版编目(CIP)数据

欧洲文学里程碑/(英)菲利普·盖斯凯尔(Gaskell, P.)
著. —影印本. —武汉:武汉大学出版社, 2006. 7

书名原文: Landmarks in European Literature

ISBN 7-307-05003-X

I. 欧… II. 加… III. 文学史—欧洲—英文 IV. I500.9

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2006)第 031174 号

著作权合同登记号:图字 17-2006-009

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This reprint of *Landmarks in European Literature* is published by arrangement with Edinburgh University Press. For sale in China only.

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责任编辑:王春阁

版式设计:支笛

出版发行:武汉大学出版社 (430072 武昌 珞珈山)

(电子邮件:wdp4@whu.edu.cn 网址:www.wdp.com.cn)

印刷:湖北通山县九宫印务有限公司

开本:880×1230 1/32 印张:8.25 字数:218千字

版次:2006年7月第1版 2006年7月第1次印刷

ISBN 7-307-05003-X/I·295 定价:18.00元

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Preface

This book, which aims to introduce thirty-two key works of European literature in translation to ordinary readers, with some account of their authors and their times, has not as far as I know been attempted in quite this way before. Books longer than this one can be written – and in most cases have been written several times over – about each of the works treated in it; and it is obviously not intended for specialists or advanced students of these works. But no one is a specialist in all thirty-two of them, and I make no apology for this attempt to enrich the lives of those who want to investigate for themselves some of the greatest European authors writing in languages other than English. What this book is not, and could not be even if I were that impossible multi-specialist, is a substitute for reading the thirty-two works I have chosen: the translations are there, nearly all of them in easily available, well-edited paperback editions: and my intention is simply to encourage people to get hold of them, to read them, and to enjoy them.

Acknowledgements

I am most grateful for help and advice generously given by Simon Barnard; Laurence and Paul Bunyan; Anne Cobby; Margaret Gaskell; Jackie Jones; Jean Khalfa; Roger Paulin; Adrian Poole; Kitty Stidworthy; Ella Westland; and the staff of Helston Public Library. Above all I owe thanks to Alison Sproston, Sub-Librarian of Trinity College, Cambridge, who has answered an unreasonable number of questions and requests with unfailing competence and good nature.

Abbreviations

...	ellipsis in the original
[...]	editorial ellipsis

Caveat Lector

No formula which expresses clearly the thought of one
generation can convey the same meaning to the generation
which follows
(Bishop B. F. Westcott)

A translation [...] cannot be the same thing in another
language, producing the same effect on the mind
(G. H. Lewes)

Translations are like women:
when they are beautiful they are not faithful, and when
they are faithful they are not beautiful
(sexist French saying)

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Introduction

A European Canon

Readers and students of literature are familiar with the idea of a canon of great authors, those authors who are generally agreed to have produced work of exceptionally high quality that has been an unavoidable influence on their successors. Harold Bloom in his *The Western Canon* (London 1995) offered a list of twenty-six canonical authors from Dante to the present day, writing in Europe and the Americas; while in *Landmarks in English Literature* (Edinburgh 1998) I suggested that eighteen British authors up to the early twentieth century met these criteria, and that a further thirty-six were close runners-up. What is attempted here is something similar but not quite the same: the aim is to identify and discuss the key works of a canon of European authors, thirty-two of them, writing in languages other than English, from Dante to Brecht. It will be understood that canonical lists are essentially personal – my list, although it might be generally acceptable to many people, would not correspond in every particular with a list compiled by another critic – and that they are liable to change as new writers emerge and critical sensibilities are modified in each new generation of readers.

There is also the problem of which particular work (or works) of each canonical author should be chosen for discussion. While readers who already know something about a particular author would probably be pleased if the choice fell on something other than that author's best-known, most-anthologised work, this would not serve the best interests of those who know little or nothing about that author. To take particular examples from the first two chapters, there is no question but that the choice for Dante must be *The Divine Comedy*, and in any case there is always something more to be learned about this enormous work however well the reader knows it already. But for Petrarch, Villon, and Ronsard,

most of whose poems were relatively short, different criteria must apply. Petrarch's *canzoniere* are not well known in detail, so any good example might be chosen; but in the cases of Villon and Ronsard, although their work is not generally familiar, there is one poem by each of them which is particularly well known and often quoted: the *Ballade des dames du temps jadis* (with the refrain 'Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?') by Villon, and the sonnet beginning 'Quand vous serez bien vieille, au soir, à la chandelle' by Ronsard. Readers who are already well acquainted with Villon or Ronsard might prefer another choice for discussion here; but I have taken the view that these relatively well-known poems are intrinsically so good, and also so influential, that it would be wrong not to choose them, for the reason that the majority of readers know them, if at all, only by repute or by the few words that I have quoted here. Similar considerations apply to many of the choices, mostly of longer works, that I have made later in the book: for Voltaire, *Candide*; for Turgénev, *Fathers and Children*; for Ibsen, *A Doll's House*; and so on.

Despite all these difficulties, I believe that the attempt to identify the key works of European literature and to read and discuss them is worth while; to ignore them is to miss not only the mutual influence between them and English literature, but also contact with some of the most original thinkers of all time – including Dante, Montaigne, Rousseau, Goethe, Tolstóy, and Ibsen – together with the aesthetic and intellectual rewards offered by their major works. Although the canonical masterpieces in English – *Hamlet*, *Paradise Lost*, *Lyrical Ballads*, and so on – are reasonably familiar to serious readers of literature, the works of the great European masters are not so well known. This is not only because we are inclined to regard them as a less important part of our literary heritage than literature in English, but also because we are relatively unfamiliar with their national, literary, and historical contexts; and not least because they are written in foreign languages and must usually be read in translation.

Reading foreign literature in translation

The British are notoriously monoglot. Not many of us can read even one foreign language fluently; very few but language specialists can read two or three; and we are usually obliged to see the great works of European literature through the distorting glass of translation.

This is not to disparage translators, to whom we owe a great debt, but they themselves would be the first to acknowledge that translation is an imperfect medium for the transmission of even the simplest literature written in prose, and that it is especially inadequate for expressing the poetry of one language in terms of another.

Only the basic words for material things (such as English 'dog', French *chien*, German *Hund*) translate directly between languages without some distortion of meaning; and even simple words tend to have subsidiary senses that differ from language to language. For instance, the French noun *livre* is generally a 'book' in English (but not a 'book' in betting or a 'cheque book' or a 'match book', for which we look to *pari*, *cahier*, and *carnet* in French); while *livre* also means a 'pound', weight or sterling. Then in German there is *Buch*, but also *Teil*, *Band*, *Heft*, and *Block*. As for abstract nouns such as the French *amour* and German *Liebe*, the translator has to consider a number of English words with different shades of meaning, such as 'love', 'desire', 'passion', 'amorousness', 'affection', 'fondness', 'friendship', and 'liking'. These are simple examples which do not touch on the possible traps to be found in the homonyms, the synonyms and near-synonyms, and the strange idiomatic usages that lurk in every language.

There is also the question of which sort of English is preferred for the translation. A British reader, for instance, who is comfortable with a translation into British English might be put off by a translation into American English; and vice versa.

For poetry the situation is even worse. The rhythms, sounds, puns, nuances, and emotional charges of poetry simply cannot be translated from one language to another, and cannot easily be mimicked in the inevitably different modes of another language. One solution is to construct something like a parallel poem in English – preferably by a translator who is also a poet and can do it in verse – which gives as well as it can the meaning of the original, and suggests its devices and characteristics by means of comparable usages in English.¹ Nevertheless, as G. H. Lewes put it definitively in his biography of Goethe in 1855:

A translation [of a poem] may be good as a translation, but it cannot be an adequate reproduction of the original. It may be a good poem; it may be a good imitation of another poem; it may be better than the original; but it

¹ The texts of some French, German, and Italian poems in Appendix B may be compared with the English versions given both there and in the relevant chapters of this book.

cannot be an adequate reproduction; it cannot be the same thing in another language, producing the same effect on the mind.²

Another way of translating poetry is to attempt a literal prose translation. But 'can there be any such thing?' asks Robert M. Durling, an able translator of Petrarch:

Granted [he goes on] that one omits the expressiveness of rhyme and play of forms, granted that one often has to disentangle periodic, subordinating syntax into simpler, coordinating structure, there are three other principal difficulties. Petrarch is obscure, he is ambiguous, and he is refined and even precious in his diction. There are many passages where the meaning is doubtful [...] or disputed [...] Many of Petrarch's words bring with them a wealth of associations [...] derived from earlier use. These associations can almost never be conveyed in English, and sometimes there is no English word with even a reasonably similar denotation. (*Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, trs. by R. M. Durling, Harvard University Press 1976, pp. ix-x)

I would add that, having read all the translations that I could find of the poets treated in this book, most of the translations in verse (especially of French poetry) seem to me to lose more in verbal accuracy than they gain in verbal music. But, although I personally tend to prefer the prose versions because they are closer in meaning to the originals, I have included examples of both sorts of translation so that readers can make up their own minds about which they prefer.

There are other questions. For one, how should the translator represent in English the personal prose style of a foreign author? Should he attempt to follow his subject's sentence structure or should he simply ignore it? For another, is it better to read a translation of an early work made soon after the time of its composition, which will suggest the flavour of its period; or to have a modern translation in the English of our own time, which will avoid the misapprehensions that can result from reading older forms of our own language? – for there is something to be said for either course. Do we, in short, think that Dryden is right when he says of his translation of Juvenal, '[I] have endeavour'd to make him speak

² *The Life and Works of Goethe*, Everyman's Library, 1908 and reprints, p. 483. Lewes's pronouncement goes to the heart of the matter; but valuable discussions of the problems of translating poetry are to be found in the Introduction to David Luke's translation of Goethe's *Faust* Part One, Oxford World's Classics 1987, pp. xlix–lv; in ch. 1 of A. D. P. Briggs's *Pushkin: Eugene Onegin*, Cambridge University Press 1992; and in the Note on the Translation in James E. Folen's version of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Oxford World's Classics 1995, pp. xxv–xxx. The philosophy of translation is considered at greater length in George Steiner's erudite *After Babel*, rev. edn., Oxford University Press 1991.

that kind of English, which he wou'd have spoken had he liv'd in England, and had written to this Age'?³

A bleak, dismissive answer is given by the novelist and critic Vladímir Nabókov, who writes in the Foreword to his version of Lérmontov's short novel *A Hero of Our Time*,⁴ (1840, translated 1958):

This is the first English translation of Lérmontov's novel. The book has been paraphrased into English several times,⁵ but never translated before. The experienced hack may find it quite easy to turn Lérmontov's Russian into slick English clichés by means of judicious omission, amplification, and levigation;⁶ and he will tone down everything that might seem unfamiliar to the meek and imbecile reader visualised by his publisher. But the honest translator is faced with a different task.

In the first place, we must dismiss, once and for all, the conventional notion that a translation 'should read smoothly', and 'should not sound like a translation' (to quote the would-be compliments, addressed to vague versions, by genteel reviewers who never have and never will read the original texts). In point of fact, any translation that does *not* sound like a translation is bound to be inexact upon inspection; while, on the other hand, the only virtue of a good translation is faithfulness and completeness. Whether it reads smoothly or not depends on the model, not on the mimic. (Mikhail Lérmontov, *A Hero of our Time*, trs. by Vladímir Nabókov, Oxford World's Classics 1984, pp. xii–xiii.)

An entirely different view is taken by Norman Denny, also a novelist, who translated Victor Hugo's long – he thinks over-long – novel *Les Misérables* (1862, translated 1976, now a Penguin Classic). He writes:

It is now generally recognised that the translator's first concern must be with his author's *intention*; not with the words he uses or with the way he uses them, if they have a different impact when they are rendered too faithfully into English, but with what he is seeking to convey to the reader. [Denny then explains that in *Les Misérables* Hugo is frequently long-winded, extravagant in his use of words, sprawling and self-indulgent; that this adversely affects his readability; and that the translator can:] 'edit' – that is to say abridge, tone down the rhetoric, even delete where the passage in question is merely an elaboration of what has already been said.

³ Juvenal, *From the Satires*, translated by John Dryden (1693), from the Dedication. (Dryden made the same remark, slightly amended, in the Dedication to his translation of Virgil, 1697.) A comparison of an eighteenth-century with a twentieth-century translation of *Don Quixote* can be made on pp. 39–40 and 228–9 below.

⁴ See p. 87 below.

⁵ Nabókov identifies five previous versions; there have been others.

⁶ To 'levigate' is to make a smooth paste of something.

I have edited in this sense throughout the book, as a rule only to a minor degree, and never, I hope, so drastically as to be unfaithful to Hugo's intention. (Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, Penguin Classics 1982, pp. 11–12).

According to the ability and attitude of the translator, then, versions of the same foreign text can differ from each other in their degree of verbal accuracy, and in their capacity to convey the style and tone of the author, and the feeling of the place and period of the original work. To show how markedly translations of the same work can differ from each other in these ways, Appendix A, pp. 217–22, gives a paragraph from the original French of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857), which was written with scrupulous attention to vocabulary and style, together with five different translations of it, and detailed criticism of short passages taken from these translations.

But, however able the translator, we have to accept the fact that translations of foreign works of literature are certain to be imperfect representations of the originals. There is little that we can do about this but be aware that it is so; and be thankful that we do have translations, however defective, rather than not being able to read the great works of European literature at all.

The availability of translations

Three series of translated classics published in Britain are outstanding: Everyman Classics, Oxford World's Classics and Penguin Classics. The Everyman and Oxford series were begun as pocket hardbacks before the First World War, and the Penguin series had its first big success in 1946 with the publication of E. V. Rieu's prose translation of Homer's *Odyssey* in paperback. Everyman changed from hardback to paperback in the 1960s, but has now returned to the more expensive hardback form, with mostly new, annotated translations. Oxford went on with its pretty and convenient little pocket hardbacks until the 1980s but then changed permanently to paperbacks (which have recently been changed again to a slightly larger format). Oxford has been careful to keep its classic texts up to date with the latest scholarship, and they are now generally the best translated and best edited, as well as usually the cheapest, of all. The Penguin Classics have always been in paperback,⁷ but they too have now changed to a larger format; the translations are in many cases

⁷ A few Penguin Classics were reissued in hardback in the 1960s.

older than those of the Oxford series, and lack Oxford's annotations and other apparatus, but new, annotated translations are being substituted for the old ones (some of the old ones being reprinted in the ultra-cheap Penguin Popular Classics series). Of these three series, Penguin has the widest coverage of titles: of the twenty-three pre-twentieth-century works examined in this book, Penguin currently has in print translations of nineteen (one in duplicate, and one as selections); Oxford has fourteen (one as selections), and Everyman eleven (two as selections).

There is also the great series of Methuen Drama (or Methuen World Classics), paperback collections of the works of over fifty major dramatists (some of them in several volumes) from Aeschylus to the present day.

How this book is arranged

The thirty-two works that I have chosen are gathered into fourteen chapters in approximately chronological order, those in each chapter having some connection with each other. Each chapter is prefaced by an introduction outlining the national, historical, and literary contexts in which the two or three works it contains were written. This is followed by a short biography of the author of each work; a cultural and critical discussion of the work itself; a note on the problems of translating it; and suggestions for further reading. As far as possible I have used and referred to the easily available paperback translations in the Penguin Classics and Oxford World's Classics series mentioned above.

I have not been consistent in using the English or the foreign forms of the titles of particular works, but have used whichever is more familiar, citing, for instance, *The Divine Comedy* and *Death in Venice*, but *Les Fleurs du mal* and *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

Quotations in the text, which are kept short, are mostly taken from English translations; and a selection of quotations in French, German and Italian, are given, with some additional English translations, in Appendix B.

Appendix C concerns the form and pronunciation of Russian names, which puzzle some readers; while Appendix D attempts to give the value in today's money of mid- to late-nineteenth-century pounds, francs, roubles, marks, and kroner, as an aid to interpreting aspects of nineteenth-century European fiction.