

Homer Among the Penguins

THE editor of Penguin Classics, Dr E. V. Rieu, has done more than most men to make ancient Greek into swift, modern and readable English. Like Matthew Arnold's ideal translator, he has sensed the quality of Homer as eminently rapid, eminently plain and direct in words and thought, and as eminently noble. Homer never nods, he says, and with this conviction has transmuted classics into racy best-sellers, his *Odyssey* alone selling no fewer than 900,000 copies. Success has borne with it only a single regret. "I wish," said Dr Rieu as he paused briefly in New Zealand during a recent world tour, "I wish that Homer in the Elysian Fields could know about it."

Books are read almost wholly for pleasure, Dr Rieu considers, so that the only way the classics can survive in an increasingly Greekless society is to present them in a form that will not frighten people off. The *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* therefore were translated from Homer hexameters into English prose. "Nobody would have read them," he says, "If I'd translated them into verse."

Dr Rieu, who gives a rhyming guide ("pleased to see you, Doctor Rieu") to the pronunciation of his name, has no personal objection to verse forms. Indeed he is one-fourth part of *A Puffin Quartet of Poets*, a forthcoming book of verses for children. But he is sure that Homer wrote in the accepted literary idiom of his day and that he is best translated into what is the corresponding idiom of our day, which is prose. He would not admit it, but gave the strongest impression that he thought Homer would support this view. "Prose," he reminded us, "was not yet invented in Homer's day."

Both in translating himself, and in editing the work of others, Dr Rieu says his aim is always to obtain the best possible English, avoiding the temptation to be too contemporary and colloquial. At least 50 years will pass, he hopes, before the changing use of English makes it necessary once more to bring Homer up to date. He is uncomfortably aware, however, that the huge vocabulary and mixed origins which make English such a flexible language are also the qualities which allow of rapid change. In the 18th century, he notes, English inclined to be a little too Latin; nowadays it is tending toward Middle and Old English.

In choosing other scholars to translate for the Penguin Classics, Dr Rieu says he judges mainly by the English they use. This is not to say that eminent writers of novels and the like are often chosen: they are not. Translation itself, he argues, is a creative art, where each translator must create a style to suit his original, and the stylistic habits of many writers would actually be a handicap. "Of course," adds Dr Rieu, "when I have chosen a man for his English I also get other scholars to see that he is what I call scholar-proof as well."

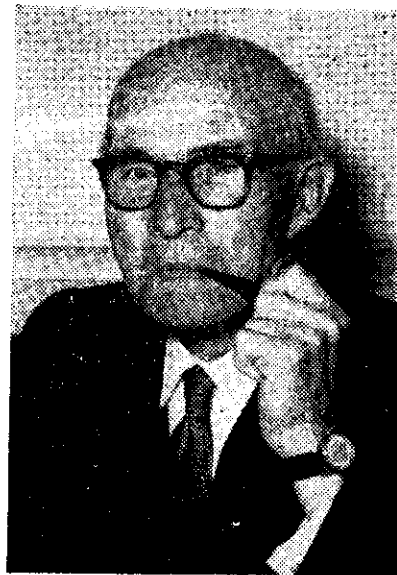
Writers and translators being what they are, Dr Rieu has sometimes found the editorial chair something of a hot seat. He recalls having returned a manu-

script of one of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to its translator, Neville Coghill, with a number of blue-pencilled comments, and that Coghill later admitted he had spent the remainder of that day in a state of white anger. Not till the following day, the writer admitted, had he been able to study the critical matter with any degree of objectivity and to conclude that "Perhaps this chap Rieu has something to him."

"But I hope I haven't made too many enemies," says Dr Rieu, "and at least I can say that I take the same medicine myself. I always tell writers: 'Whatever you do, read your stuff aloud to a critical audience. Otherwise it is so easy to convey to readers something you didn't intend.'" As an example, he mentioned a phrase from his translation of the *Odyssey* which originally referred to the River of Lamentation "which is a branch of Styx." The unfortunate coupling of "branch" and "styx" was only apparent in speech. The phrase in the published version now reads, "which is a branch of the Waters of Styx"—and even this contains the germs of an Americanism which escaped both Dr Rieu and his critical audience.

Apart from its usefulness in revealing errors, Dr Rieu considers that reading aloud may be as good a test of the quality of prose as it is of poetry. And because, over the years, he has developed a discriminating ear, we asked what he thought of New Zealand usage of his beloved English language. His reply took us slightly aback.

"As far as I've read and heard New Zealand writing and speech," he said, "I think a very high level is being kept. I think the language is in far better hands here than it is for example in the United States or Australia. You're in the tradition. Americanism is all right perhaps, but I resent its invasion of England and the Commonwealth. Perhaps you go to films less here than we



Spencer Digby photograph

DR E. V. RIEU

"Prose was not invented in Homer's day"

do in England, but the American influence is less pronounced. These things apart, I think English has for a long time been, and will be, the best language in the world. It has a wonderful flexibility, and its mixed descent gives it great riches."

As the one-time manager in India for Oxford University Press and later managing-director of Methuen's, Dr Rieu's judgment of business is no less penetrating than his judgment of books. When asked about his own methods of work, he observed that most businessmen who attend an office actually work for not more than two hours daily. "Being one of Sir Allen Lane's outside editors I don't have to go to the office," he said, "but I do work for four hours—from nine o'clock to one—each day." In spite of this Dr Rieu professes to

being a slow writer and to having once been held up over two lines of the *Iliad* for the best part of a week. The translation of the *Odyssey* took four years—excluding an interruption by war service, as a Home Guard major—but it was this which began the now-famous series of Penguin Classics. Three years each were required for *The Four Gospels* and for *The Voyage of the Argo*, by Apollonius of Rhodes, which is to appear in January.

Other works scheduled to appear next year are Huysman's *Against Nature*, the Middle-English poems *Piers Plowman* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, selections from Buddhist Classics, a second volume of Moliere's plays, a full translation of Josephus's *The Jewish Wars*, St Francis of Assisi's *The Little Flowers*, the second part of Goethe's *Faust*, Plato's *Gorgias*, and the *Maxims* of La Rochefoucauld.

Of all translation work, says Dr Rieu, the most difficult is humour. It is far too easy to give false impressions such as that the original author was writing only yesterday. In the main he confines his humorous ventures to his hobby of writing children's verse. The following example from the forthcoming *Puffin Quartet of Poets* shows that here, at least, he writes in a fashion wholly English in tradition:

Two people live in Rosamund,
And one is very nice;
The other is devoted
To every kind of vice—

To walking where the puddles are,
And eating far too quick,
And saying words she shouldn't know,
And wanting spoons to lick.

Two people live in Rosamund,
And one (I say it twice)
Is very nice and very good:
The other's only nice.

During his brief return visit to New Zealand—he was here 50 years ago when he "buzzed round the world" just after coming down from Oxford—Dr Rieu was interviewed for the NZBS by K. L. McKay, Lecturer in Classics at Victoria University. The resultant recording, entitled *Translating the Classics*, will be broadcast by all YC stations at 7.30 p.m. on Wednesday, December 3.

THE YOUNGER SCHOENBERG

SCHOENBERG'S first significant work, the *Gurrelieder*, clearly shows the influence of Wagner, Strauss and the Germanic tradition of emotionalism; the 26-year-old Schoenberg, however, expressed emotional intensity not in the warm breezes of Wagnerian harmonies nor in vague melodies laden with the opium of dreams, but in powerful dissonance and in an incessant flow of modulation and chromaticism.



SCHOENBERG

The orchestration is of such colossal size (the swollen orchestra includes eight flutes, seven oboes, seven trombones, ten horns, four harps and an assortment of iron chains and other odd instruments) that early critics were astounded and baffled. For the first British performance—in 1928—it is said to have cost the BBC something like £2000 merely to rehearse it.

The *Gurrelieder* is set amid forests, castles, tombs and the sea—the same elemental world that inspired Weber,

Wagner and Berlioz to their finest efforts. It is not a drama but simply "Songs of Gurra" which relate the medieval saga of the illicit love of King Waldemar and Tove in his castle at Gurra. King Waldemar's jealous Queen contrives to murder Tove and when, overwhelmed with grief he curses God, he is condemned with his henchmen to wander the skies in a mystical hunt from sunset to dawn. The story of the murder is given to the symbolical voices of the Wood Doves who fill the air with lamentations, and the remainder of the work is occupied by King Waldemar's soliloquies for the dead Tove and his defiant attitude to heaven for destroying her. The King is mocked by Klaus the Fool in a long stretch of mad bitterness; and there is also a Reciter, who speaks only in the final melodrama.

The original text of the *Gurrelieder* was written by the Danish poet Jans Peter Jacobsen—it being the German translation of this which Schoenberg set to music. The story is one that could very easily become ridiculous instead of tragic and Schoenberg avoids this pitfall

with considerable skill. Technically he inclines towards Strauss, creating harmonic colour from melodic strands that weave and interweave endlessly; although the work is stretched across such a vast frame, some of the most inspired moments are derived from simple combinations of a few wind or string instruments. Perhaps the most amazing thing about the whole conception is the youthful Schoenberg's mastery of his material: nowhere does one find a suggestion of experiment.

It must be remembered, however, that for all its charm the *Gurrelieder* is no longer a vital work. In the sophisticated musical atmosphere of today it seems something of a curiosity: it is not Schoenberg at his greatest and it is a pity that, because it has so long been a subject for controversy, it should be more widely known than some of his later works of far greater merit. It will probably continue for many years to overshadow the true greatness of Schoenberg.

Gurrelieder: 2YC, Wednesday, December 3 at 8.57 p.m.; sung in German with Richard Lewis (tenor) as Waldemar; Ethel Semser (soprano) as Tove; Neil Tangeman (mezzo-soprano) as Waldaube; John Riley (bass) as Bauer; Ferry Gruber (tenor) as Klaus-Narr; Morris Gesell (speaker) and the Chorus and Orchestra of the New Symphony Society of Paris.

N.Z. LISTENER, NOVEMBER 28, 1958.