
2018

Better Left Unsaid and other poems

John Brugaletta

California State University, Fullerton, jbrugaletta@gmail.com

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Recommended Citation

Brugaletta, John (2018) "*Better Left Unsaid* and other poems," *Transference*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 10.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/transference/vol6/iss1/10>

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Philodemus

Better Left Unsaid

Here, slave, make my lamp enebriate with oil,
The quiet witness of those things we won't discuss,
And then retreat. I'll ask of you no further toil.
When leaving, lock the door; we'll not be infamous.

And now my Xantho... Ah, my bed, the lover's friend,
You are about to learn just how two lovers blend.

Still Young

Philodemus

Sweet Charito is sixty years of age,
Her hair as dark as when she was nineteen,
Her breasts so firm they've never known a bra,
Her clear, un wrinkled skin the scent of rose.

All you who do not quail at love's desire,
Come see how well preserved the woman is.

Le Moment Psychologique

Rufinus

I prayed I might have you one night.
I did, and you stripped. What a sight!
 But when I looked down,
 My little droll clown
Just couldn't achieve any height.

Commentary

There seem to be at least two important problems that the translator ideally avoids. First there is the literal, word-for-word translation at one extreme. At the opposite extreme there is the free and easy poem or story that the translator was reminded of when reading the source of the translation. These are the Scylla and Charybdis of translation. The first extreme often produces oddities, while the second is less a translation than an original work. One must find a sweet spot between the two. Of course translation from Italian, for example, has a different sweet spot from translating a Greek passage.

The ideal product of any translation of poetry strikes me as having a strong degree of faithfulness to the original in meaning and tone, but it need not be rigidly faithful to word order. A more difficult sort of translation lies in rendering a work into both metrical and rhyming verse, for when composing an original poem, the search for a rhyme will often trigger a new idea or phrase, but writing a free-verse target poem renders no such benefit in and of itself.

Ezra Pound's many translations are prime examples of too little faithfulness to the originals, while the King James Bible errs for our day only in its archaisms, both intentional and unintentional. The translators clearly were intent upon producing a magniloquent version and resorted to a form of discourse that was antiquated even in their time.

Source texts:

Philodemus. "Better Left Unsaid." *The Greek Anthology*, vol. I, Harvard University Press, 1969, book V, p. 4.

Philodemus. "Still Young." *The Greek Anthology*, vol. I, Harvard University Press, 1969, book V, p. 13.

Rufinus. "Le Moment Psychologique." *The Greek Anthology*, vol. I, Harvard University Press, 1969, book V, p. 47.