So what's in a book?

BOB BLAISDELL

Three linguistical tales from New York

It's Greek to me

'Bob, how about you then? I think it's your turn, isn't it?'

'It is? Okay, here goes.'

I read the Greek aloud, in a pronunciation that – I continually realize – differs from the one Professor M gives it, or from the ways the other half-dozen students read it. I try to at least hit the accent right, and put myself into something like the frame of mind I have or had when I read French or Spanish aloud. I fail to elide two vowels into a diphthong, and Professor M corrects me:

'*You*-geneis.'

Immediately I repeat his correction, and repeat it again after his reiteration.

'*You*-geneis.'

When I finish the sentence, he says: 'Okay, that's enough of the Greek aloud. Now some translation.' He does not want us to write down our translations of passages, and he does not like us putting the English in pencil above a tough vocabulary word. 'Otherwise you're not translating, you're just reading a translation – it's your own, sure, but it's not going to help you any. Read it enough times to yourself so that you know what it means, but don't write down a translation. Okay, now go ahead.'

It is a tricky passage, but I have read it a dozen times at least – aloud to myself, silently, slowly looking up word by word, checking the notes from two different reader's editions of the *Anabasis*, as well as having read (Professor M would not approve) the translation by Rouse. I know this translation cold, or so I think, and I confidently (cockily) begin my translation: 'There was a spring there, and near the road of Midas —'

'The road of Midas?'

'The Midian road? – Wait. Okay, The spring being of Midas – I have panicked: I'm not reading the passage but remembering the meaning, as if the words weren't to be read, but to be a kind of visual prompt for telling the story.

Professor M gets a pained look on his face, and I start to stammer, because I like and respect him and feel grateful that he has passed me along to second-year Greek. He has seemed favorably disposed towards me even though I am probably the seventh best student of Greek in a seven-student class. 'What's your subject?' he asks in his weary voice.

I have regained some composure – anyhow, I know the answer:

'Road! – I mean, spring!'

'Right. So go on.'

'There was, near the road, a spring –'

'"The" probably.'

'There was near the road, a spring – the! spring . . .'

But again, instead of reading slowly, figuring out phrase by phrase the relationship between words, I see those familiar lines of Greek prose. They look like a picture, not language, and I

BOB BLAISDELL is an assistant professor of English at City University of New York's Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn. He earned his undergraduate degree in Literature at the College of Creative Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara, and his master's and Ph.D. from that university's English Department. He was an editor for four years at a California newspaper, and after moving to New York with his wife ten years ago, has helped teach a writing workshop for the patrons of a Manhattan soup kitchen. He reviews books on literature, education, and homelessness for various newspapers, and has edited more than a dozen books, including 'Tolstoy as Teacher: Leo Tolstoy's Writings on Education' and 'The Wit and Wisdom of Anthony Trollope'. He is currently writing a book tentatively titled 'Great Writers Teaching Writing', with chapters on, among others, Tolstoy, Trollope, Borges, Kafka, Jane Austen – and Dr Johnson.

DOI: 10.1017/S0266078404004055

 © 2004 Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078404004055 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tell about them or explain them the way you might describe a painting, but knowing or fearing that I am about to be corrected for errors. It matters that the participle, the meaning of which I am drawing a blank on, is in the middle voice, and when I confess, in agony, 'I forget *kaloumeneh*,' he tells the answer (though he habitually does not):

'"So-called." That's not an easy one. But it comes, of course, from *kal-e-oh*.'

I am reminded, and push on, slowly, stumblingly, being corrected or 'adjusted' a half-a-dozen times in about four lines. I'm exhausted, disappointed in my flub of a tricky but familiar, extremely familiar, passage. I sigh when the bearded Religous Studies graduate student from last year's class gives me a quick look of sympathy and a shrug, as if to say, 'Yeah, that was tough.' But he rarely messes up. He probably has as much anxiety as I do about Greek, at least he expresses it plenty, but he is very good, and the class knows it and Professor M knows it.

Anyhow, I shrug back at him as if to say, 'I apologize for wasting everyone's time.' It is agonizing even if it's not on your account when Professor M asks those leading questions. When the class is over I get up to go; I'm usually the first one out of the room. Professor M – his colleagues call him (out of affection I'm pretty sure) 'Papa Joe' – says to my apologetic look on my way to the door, past him at the blackboard where he is erasing everything (as a courtesy to the next teacher), 'Hey Bob, you're doing all right. Really, I think you're coming around.' I can't bring myself to thank him or deny it, so I shrug, smiling (but again apologetically) and leave. I start on my way back towards the English department, where I'm a graduate student, already planning for my next reading of Xenophon: tonight, two hours. I do want to do well, I'm not optimistic that I will, but I am determined (at least momentarily) to keep at it steadily.

Faking it

Before I started graduate school I worked in Southern California for three years at a residential school for children with learning disabilities. I'll call it Our Lady of Hope. The children lived and went to school on the grounds. As part of the school's residential staff I would teach the kids among other things table manners and domestic skills. The kids I liked best and worked with the most were in a coed group, and they were usually the youngest or scrawniest or most backward in the school. Michou was about ten, maybe eleven, when we got to be friends. She was skinny and Polynesian-looking, with big front teeth, and cute. All the other kids in the group looked up to her; she was the queen. She spoke as well as most ten- or eleven-year-old girls, could articulate anything, and to look at her you couldn't figure out how she could be retarded. She did not look slow or act slow. She was responsible, dressed with a degree of taste, and was well-liked by staff and kids. It sounds bad to say, but she was so wonderfully 'normal.'

It was not until after maybe my first year that I realized for myself the extent of her limitations, which I had heard about: she could not tell time, she could not read. She could copy words well enough, but read them, no. Some of the least social, most severely developmentally disabled kids could tell time (even without having a concept of what time was – which Michou certainly did; the hands and numbers just did not translate themselves into 'time' for her). She could not work with numbers or written words. Something didn't click, but she was so bright otherwise and attractive, that I could not resist feeling that something would or had to click sometime, and that she would become the all-around normal kid she seemed (her parents shared this hope). Meanwhile, some of the kids with Down syndrome could read off simple sentences and could tell the correct time to the quarter hour.

'What time's it, Miche?" I would ask, showing her the toy clock, its hands indicating 4:30.

'My my, Bob, you forgot to shave today, didn't you?' She put her finger on my cheek.

'Miche.'

'Hm?'

'What time's it?'

'Do we have to?'

'Yeah.'

'It's um . . .' She touched the clock hands. 'What time do you want it to be?'

'Where's the little hand?'

'This one? – Um. Near the four. It's four o'clock. Can I get my snack now?'

'No, no. Look, you're right, the little hand's on the four. Where's the big hand?' (Understand, dear reader, that she had probably been run through a time class at least a hundred times over the past two years.)

'Six. It's six o'clock.'

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078404004055 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In spite of not being able to read, she would sometimes sit on her bed, or at the play table with an open book or coloring book, reading aloud to one of her group-mates (who could have read for themselves, though with little or no comprehension, with a teacher prompting them).

'Now, Dorrie,' she would say in a teacherly tone, 'sit down. No, put your purse down.'

'Down?'

'Yes, down. – Yes. And I'll read this to you.'

If I got too close or seemed to be observing her, Michou would clam up, embarrassed, as if she knew she wasn't fooling me. But if I kept myself busy with another kid or other kids I could overhear her.

'Dorothy, look. "And Bugs decided to have a picnic with all his carrots."' The sentence under the coloring-book picture read: "Bugs enjoys a carrot picnic." And she would continue, happily, except to rebuke Dorothy occasionally for her inattention.

Sometimes at night after all the kids were put to bed and I was cleaning up the residence, or doing homework, or filling in charts at the same play table where Michou would 'read' her books in the afternoon and evening, she would wander out of her dormitory and, in an appropriately quiet voice, pipe, 'Hi. Whatcha doing?'

'Oh, Miche, you should be in bed.'

'But I can't sleep.'

I would frown, and then continue my work, which she took to mean (and of course correctly) I would let her sit up with me for a while if she were quiet.

'What are you reading?' she would ask.

'Poems.'

'Poems?'

'You know, "Roses are red, violets are blue, come smell my feet – "'

'"– Pew, pew, pew!"'

'Right.'

'It's for school?'

'Yeah.'

'I'll be right back. I've got homework too.'

And she was off, though I was whispering after her, 'Miche, no, don't go in there rustling stuff around. You'll wake up Dorrie.' She ignored me, and rustled in the dark dormitory, and then I heard her in the hallway, and then she came in and sat at the opposite side of the table. 'I think I'll color first.' She opened a Dukes of Hazzard coloring book.

'Isn't that Leonard's?'

'He said I could use it.'

'Oh.'

'Let's see, where was I?' And she opened the book up. She put her finger on the caption under a picture of a fat sheriff shaking his fist, and she then pretended, glancing up at me self-consciously, but trying to play it cool, to read the words (they were in large-type capitals and easy for me to read upside down): 'THOSE DUKE BOYS, I'LL GET THEM YET!'

She said instead, her finger slipping along that caption, 'The Duke boys sure make me mad!' And she laughed, delighted with the sheriff's vexation. She knew that coloring book very well, and knew the adventures to come, and could have summarized the entire plot in fifteen seconds. But she was not reading; she just knew how it all went. She knew all the letters and could sound out easy words, but she rarely could force herself to keep her attention on the words. She would guess the word, or the sense, and keep moving. The agony of learning was particularly acute for her; it seemed to shame her.

'Miche'

'Hm?'

'Let's color.'

I closed my Norton Anthology.

'Okay. I'll go get my big box of crayons.'

'No, no, you'll – ' And she was off into the dark dormitory again. When she came back I had moved her chair to my side and had opened the coloring book to another page.

'Oh, this one,' she said. It was a picture of an out-of-control sheriff's car about to dive into a pond. She put her finger on the first word. "It" – "The", I mean.'

I nodded, trying not frighten her with encouragement. 'And this word . . . hmm. – 'The car takes a bath,"' she said quickly. She flipped the page so I wouldn't stop her and point out word by word the correct reading: "The sheriff and his car take a plunge."

'Let's color something else,' she suggested. She found a picture of a young woman in a workshirt, smiling. There was one word under the picture, and she knew what it was: 'DAISY.'

'All right,' I said. 'We'll color Daisy. Then you gotta go to bed. – How about blue hair?' I liked to tease the kids by suggesting incongruous colors.

'Blue!?' she said, wrinkling her nose, and then, catching on, smiling. 'Okay! Then how about a green face?'

'Green!?'

'Well, maybe she's got a stomach ache.'

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078404004055 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The blue-covered book

I was reading my student Chin Yee Lum's observation of a 'public space,' part of my college freshman English class's field work research. Chin Yee chose a room in a public library in her neighborhood in Brooklyn. I love the life in libraries, but I was tired and not feeling very responsive by the time I got to Chin Yee's second hour of observation and the fifth or sixth single-spaced page. Then I perked up. Something was happening:

A white old-aged lady who is sitting next to my table with a long white pearl necklace down to her chest has occupied almost half of the desk. Her desk is full of books: fifteen or so.
There is a young lady sitting in front of her who is reading a novel with it in her hands.
'Do you have enough room?' the old lady asks her.
'Yes.'
'Look at what I found!' The old lady talks to her by showing her the book in blue covers.
'O.K.' She doesn't seem like replying to her and continues reading.
The old lady again tries to extend the conversation. She opens up a plastic bag with some candy in it.
'Do you want some candy? Here, you can have some.'
'No, thanks.'
The young lady seems to ignore her and continues reading her novel in her hand. Then the old lady turns around and shows the blue-covered book to the other lady who is still pacing up and down the fiction section. She, too, ignores her.
The lady seems like she is bored and she stands up and walks to the book shelves. In her return, she brings another book, although her desk is already piled with lots of books. She puts the book on her desk and picks up the blue-covered book again. She shows it to the old white guy next to her desk.
'Look what did I find!'
I wonder what this book is about.
She sits back in her seat, puts on her red-framed glasses which are bent to one side and starts reading the blue-covered book.

So, is the white old-aged lady just lonely? I couldn't (and can't) tell, but I was captivated, just as Chin Yee was, by that 'blue-covered book.' What is that book? What magic powers does it contain that the woman feels compelled to evangelize it? I thought of Jorge Luis Borges and his story 'The Secret Miracle,' with its Clementine librarian who went blind looking for God among the 400,000 books on the shelves. What had this woman found? As I was reading about her I was joyfully imagining this unlikely but promiscuous reader coming across the (or a) divinity.

At the next class meeting I read the passage above to Chin Yee and her classmates. They didn't seem to appreciate what I thought of as its comedy – that you might have in your hands the greatest book, a container of words that could transform the world, and nobody wants it – or your candy. I so wished that the woman could have asked Chin Yee to admire her book. What would Chin Yee have seen? I queried in the margin of Chin Yee's paper whether she had been able to see the title or not – but I assumed she hadn't. (She dutifully had written down everything she could see and hear.) After class she told me that she hadn't been able to see the name or title. What about its size? Big? Little? Chin Yee showed me a half-inch spread between her forefinger and thumb. (In my imagination I see a novel, sans paper cover, in sky-blue cloth.)

Two or three weeks later, when Chin Yee returned to the Highlawn Branch Library, there, to her amazement (but not, I think, to the amazement of any habitues of public libraries), was the woman:

I'm so surprised that I see this old lady again today, who I will never forget with her red-framed glasses and the long white pearl necklace. Actually, I didn't even realize that she was sitting at the table behind me as I was doing some research at the History section. As I was flipping through The Encyclopedia of the New York City on the shelf, there came two kids about six. They started to talk and talk by the shelves. Then, the old lady said with her low tone and hoarse sound, "Quiet, children, quiet, quiet . . ." She repeated herself many times and finally made me turn around for a glance.
After a while, I went to her to see if I could find out what the blue-covered book is really about. However, she seemed annoyed, as she was when she was being buzzed by those children, and said, "I don't know which book you are talking about. Don't bother me!"
Then I said, "Okay, sorry then."

Easy come, easy go. The book 'the old lady' found has been lost, replaced upon the shelves. Shall I set out, like Borges's librarian, to search for it among the books at Highlawn library? No, I think the new Secret Miracle is in Chin Yee's observation, reminding us of the chance revelations we come upon every day in our reading. ■

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078404004055 Published online by Cambridge University Press