Abstract: The culture of Ancient Greek literature is very different from our modern one. As its medium, the Ancient Greek language is incomprehensible outside the general context of Greek civilisation. Any translation of an Ancient Greek text is to some extent false, or at least artificial, and it cannot express the special character of the reality of the original. Selected translations of passages from Homer, Herodotus and Aeschines illustrate the incompatibility of the ancient and modern styles of narration. The study of the language of literature in relation to the reality it represents is advocated as a possible solution to this problem. Readers are also recommended to make the effort to study the ancient originals instead of reading the texts in translations, which can never be flawless.

Keywords: translation, ancient Greek, Homer, Herodotus, Aeschines

It is best to admit that language is primarily a vocal actualisation of the tendency to see realities symbolically, that it is precisely this quality which renders it a fit instrument for communication and that, in the actual give and take of social intercourse, it has been complicated and refined into the form in which it is known today (Sapir 1985: 15).

This statement by Edward Sapir might now seem a cliché (but it should be remembered that he wrote it originally in 1933) and anyone who deals with language (philologists, translators, literary critics) in his/her profession is aware, more or less consciously, of the complex relationships between language and reality. In the most obvious terms, language is a part of culture, and it can only express what is known and understood within the culture that uses the language. A text produced in a particular culture contains an understanding of and symbolises a reality that is characteristic for that culture. It is a statement that applies only to its culture and, at times, speaks of a reality foreign to other cultures. Thus each translation must go
beyond simple lexical equivalents for a text written or pronounced in a foreign language; above all, however, it is everything that is suggested by the dictionary meaning of the Latin word translatio: “the action of moving an object to a different location” (and perhaps the most remarkable of all the other senses listed in dictionaries is the very literal and down-to-earth “to pour something into another vessel” – a true metaphor when compared to “to restate in another manner...”).

Λόγος δυνάστης μέγας ἔστιν, wrote the sophist Gorgias in the fifth century BCE in a terse commentary on the role of the word in Greek culture. Even this short maxim presents a problem in translation due to the broad and hazy scope of the meaning of the term logos, which, in Gorgias, acquires a sense different than in Plato’s dialogue Protagoras. What Gorgias meant was, above all – yet not exclusively – poetry and its potential to arouse pleasure and pain in the audience. He saw similarities between the word’s impact on the receiver and that of charms (goeteia) and magic (mageia). He spoke of people that are overcome with enthusiasm (once again in the Greek sense of the word) at poetry. For enthousiasmós is man’s possession by a deity; man becomes entheos by having god (theos) in him/herself. This is a state that can be imparted by Dionysus (wine and Dionysian mysteries), Apollo (poetic and prophetic inspiration) and Eros (the passion of love). According to Gorgias, the word logos can have the same effect.

Gorgias himself was no practitioner of poetry. Yet he was a teacher of rhetoric, which he understood as the art of persuasion; its aim was to make the listener thoroughly enchanted by the speaker and unable to ponder the rationality and the quality of the latter’s arguments, so that the listener could do nothing but yield to the power of the spoken word. Yet the word transforms the speaker as well as the listener: “But whenso he uttered his great voice from his chest, and words like snowflakes on a winter’s day, then could no mortal man beside vie with Odysseus.” (Iliad III: 220).

This characterisation of Odysseus follows a description of Agamemnon, whose figure towers above the other chiefs; the King of Ithaca seems at first insignificant in comparison. It is his speech that changes him. When he does not speak he creates no impression whatsoever; nor is his bearing accordingly regal.

In all subsequent Greek culture, Odysseus served as a symbol of rhetoric and persuasion. As performed by him, much as by the sophists and the rhetors of the fifth century BCE, the word became an instrument of Peitho: “persuasion,” “argumentation,” “obedience.” As early as Hesiod’s Opera