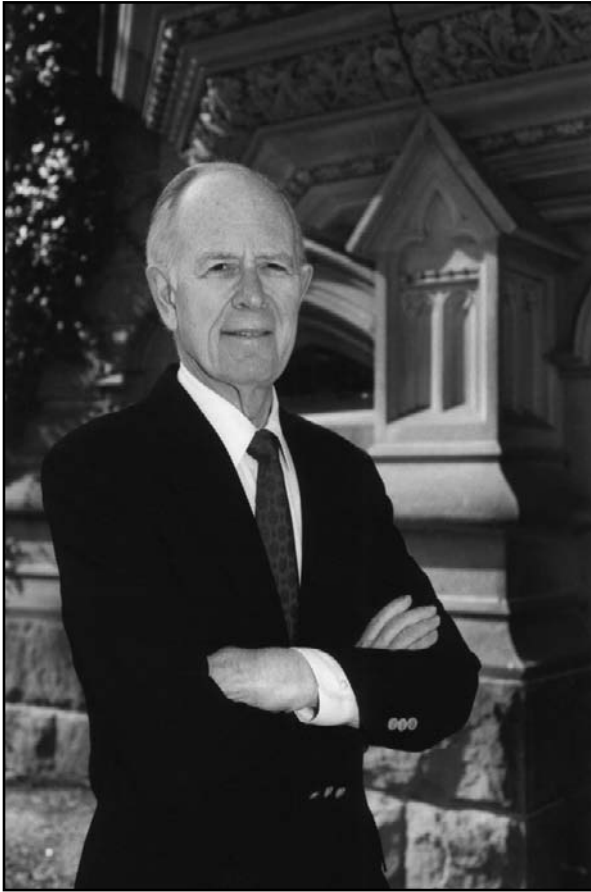

ROBERT FAGLES



PRINCETON UNIVERSITY/DENISE APPELWHITE

11 SEPTEMBER 1933 · 26 MARCH 2008

... all
 my absence is a presence
 all my passing is
 a standing fast

Robert Fagles, *I, Vincent*

HE GAVE ALL OF US THE FEELING that it was exhilarating to translate Homer and Virgil. The results surely are. Coming in the wake of his splendid renderings of Sophocles and Aeschylus, Robert Fagles's translations of *The Iliad*, then *The Odyssey*, and finally *The Aeneid*, represent a monumental achievement. Fagles takes his place in a line of great poet-translators that goes back to John Dryden and Alexander Pope. He was of course aware of this tradition. His doctoral dissertation at Yale University, where I first met him in the 1950s, had been on the subject of Pope's translation of *The Iliad*.

Bob (as he was known to his friends) felt in his own discreet way quite naturally bonded to greatness. A colleague at Princeton once remarked that when he emerged from his office after hours of early morning work, Bob's head, which he habitually carried high, would appear slightly tilted, as though he were still listening to the voices of great poets. He had in fact lived in constant familiarity with the poets of the past and present; his memory was rich with echoes and quotations.

To appreciate fully the nature of Bob's achievement, one must keep in mind that he was a gifted poet in his own right. In a very original collection of poems, *I, Vincent* (1978), he performed in memorable verse the intimate workings of Vincent Van Gogh's mind and art, entering into the very spirit of the painter by moving from selected paintings and letters to the artist's haunting themes. In the process, Bob's poems constitute a manner of art criticism as well as a form of translation. *I, Vincent* also demonstrates technical prowess in its flexible and forceful prosody, its experiments in meter and rhythm, as well as typographical disposition and form. The poems are also revealing of personal motifs through repeated stress on self-portraits, on Van Gogh's religion of work, his sense of art as a vocation and as a permanent combat, capable of transforming musings on mortality and anguish into color and form.

Bob accumulated honors. Not long before his death (he was already very ill) he received an honorary degree from Princeton University, where he was the Arthur W. Marks Professor of Comparative Literature Emeritus. More recently, in November 2006, he was awarded the National Humanities Medal at a White House ceremony. But a long list of honors and awards preceded: the PEN/Ralph Manheim Medal for Translation, the Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Harold Morton Landon Translation Award of the Academy of American Poets, and others, including several hon-

orary degrees. He was elected to the American Philosophical Society and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He wore these distinctions lightly. The only one I ever heard him talk about with undisguised pride was his membership in the Academy of Arts and Letters, where he felt deeply gratified to find himself in the company of distinguished artists.

Scholarship and the craft of translation were indeed for Bob first and foremost an art. "Performance" was a word, a key word, that came up repeatedly in his conversation. And this not only because the Homeric poems were at their origin, and remained essentially, an oral phenomenon, but because in Bob's view all of teaching, writing, and translation, like music or theater, is essentially an interpretive and recreative activity. He knew better than most that even literary criticism is a performance that is to be valued not when it imposes a grid or theory, but when the critic has learned to listen to the voice of the writer under discussion, respecting inventively the parameters of a text. He knew that teaching was to have a ceremonial quality; that it represented at its best a succession of privileged moments. And Fagles's translations also offered the reader a sense of participating in a disciplined ceremony.

He had practiced the art of translation ever since his early work on the Greek poets Pindar and Bacchylides, and over the years he had meditated on the problem of rendering the classics into a modern English that would be neither too literary nor too literal or colloquial. The Homeric epics and Virgil's *Aeneid* posed quite different challenges in this respect. Fagles's translations of these great works, while retaining the majestic, formal, capacious, or terse nature of the originals, never appear stiff or artificially lofty. They preserve the flavor of the masterpieces of antiquity, their *gravitas* as well as their humanity and tenderness, with a remarkable sense of directness.

Bob's achievement is the more noteworthy as he was not a classicist by training. He had been an English major as an undergraduate (summa cum laude) at Amherst College, and his graduate studies and doctoral dissertation at Yale University were also in English literature. His Greek and his Latin were largely self-taught. It is worth mentioning that while at Yale he was profoundly influenced and encouraged by the great classicist Bernard Knox, who later wrote the splendid introductions to Bob's translations of *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid*, as well as by Maynard Mack, his much-admired thesis director, who set the highest standards of scholarly rigor.

It was at Yale that I first met Bob in the late 1950s when he was a junior colleague teaching in the same humanities program. Our friendship thus goes back fifty years. His intellectual curiosity and passion for literature made an immediate impression on me, as did his moral stance.

In 1960, he joined the English department at Princeton University, where he became a leading presence in comparative literature, first as director of the Program in Comparative Literature, then as founding chair of the department, from 1975 to 1994, leaving an indelible imprint.

As chair he displayed precious humane qualities; he valued compassion, solidarity, fairness. He knew how to extend encouragement to colleagues and had the rare capacity for admiring the achievement of others. Generous with his praise, he never ceased to make the most stringent demands on himself. His attributes as administrator were closely wedded to his qualities as a human being. Bob was affectionate by nature. Even his teasing remained affectionate, while giving proof of sharp insight. He was in fact a sound judge of people; but he also knew his own vulnerabilities. A perfectionist by temperament, he could never forget that there was a price to pay for perfectionism. He knew that there were no shortcuts. He sharpened his pencils to a symbolically exquisite fine point, aware all the while that behind the poise and apparent equanimity of the finest minds lurks the threat of recurrent inner turmoil and anguish.

Elected 1997; Committees: Jefferson Medal 2003–06; (Membership) Class V TNG Arts and Belles Lettres 2005–07

VICTOR BROMBERT

Henry Putnam University Professor
of Romance and Comparative Literature
Emeritus
Princeton University