Loeb

For The Times

He is the idyllic, imagined classical scholar. Head bowed, cloth-bound volume in hand, words from half-forgotten/half-remembered civilisations running across the well-thumbed pages. A breeze lifts his hair, because the classic he studies fits easily into a jacket-pocket and thus Homer, Virgil and Plato may be enjoyed as they were meant to be, out of doors. The scholar who puts the 'schole' the leisure back in to his endeavours.

Hmmm, if only the reality were so pleasant. The classicists' work is typically done in airless metal stacks or in front of photocopied pamphlets and computer screens. But the Loeb Classical Library – founded in 1911 by the dynamic-depressive Harvard graduate and sometime banker James Loeb – perpetuates the pursuit of antique words as an aesthetic and sensuous as well as an intellectual exercise. Loeb editions, elegantly produced, are parallel texts: the original Greek and Latin face the translation. At a glance the reader can relish not just the author in English but the character of his or her literary mother-tongue.

'The Loeb' as it is known in the business is not best loved by purists – experts who can translate ancient languages with the speed of Hermes - but is a charismatic choice for those whose Attic Greek is a little rusty; or the swathe of the British and American populations educated in the sixties, seventies and eighties: at a time when Greek and Latin were pronounced dead on arrival.

Setting out with the immodest ambition of publishing 'the entire extant Greek and Latin literature from the time of Homer to the Fall of Constantinople' the series reproduces bestsellers (Homer's Iliad,Caesar's The Gallic War et al.) as well as niche works. Those with a touch of the train-spotter about them will find Frontinus' Aqueducts of Rome, or Aelian's On The Characteristics of Animalsparticularly diverting. Sensibly, the library has now narrowed its horizons but still commissions new translations. With long-lost ancient works (plays of Sophocles, epic-poems, Christian gospels) set to emerge from the Egyptian papyri currently under infra-red examination at Oxford University, the library can depend upon virgin material. Good news for academia. James Loeb endowed a percentage of the library's profits to the Department of Classics at Harvard University and with 499 volumes in print Harvard harvests in excess of $750,000 per annum. In May another humble money-spinner will be added to the corpus: coming in at number 500 Quintilian's The Lesser Declamations – a kind of experimental law-game for the budding attorney of the 2nd century AD.

To celebrate the advent of this 500th edition 'A Loeb Classical Library Reader' has been pulled together. Here you will find old friends; Odysseus planning to dangle underneath a ram as he escapes the Cyclops; Plato (this translation from 1914) reporting Socrates' last words an Athenian jail, just hours before the 'corrupter of the youth' drinks hemlock at the behest of the state:

'Socrates sat up on his couch and bent his leg and rubbed it with his hand, and while

rubbing it, he said, "What a strange thing, my friends, that seems to be which men call pleasure! How wonderfully it is related to that which seems to be its opposite, pain, in that they will not both come to a man at the same time, and yet if he pursues the one and captures it, he is generally obliged to take the other also, as if the two were joined together in one head….when one of them comes to anyone, the other follows after. Just so it seems that in my case, after pain was in my leg on account of the fetter, pleasure appears to have come following after.'"

Although The Reader – like all anthologies (literally a gathering of flowers, but of course only ever a scoopful of petals) – is frustrating (the excerpts stop just as you're hooked, we never hear Socrates delivering his mnemonic line 'it is time to depart, for me to die, for you to live; which of us takes the better course, god only knows.') . It does transport cogent gobbets. Jilted Medea, about to kill her children, articulates the unbearable perspicacity of the playwright Euripides:

'The laughter of one's enemies is unendurable my friends.'

And Hesiod's Works and Days, recounting the creation of the first ever woman is a salutary reminder of a core Greek misogyny:

He [Zeus] told Athena to teach her crafts, to weave richly worked cloth; and golden Aphrodite to shed around her grace and painful desire and limb-devouring cares; and he ordered Hermes, the intermediary, the killer of Argus, to put into her a dog's mind and a thieving character….and the messenger of the gods…named this woman Pandora (All-gift), since all those who have their mansions on Olympus had given her a gift – a woe for men who live on bread. …

The Reader ends with a letter written by the Christian Jerome to Marcella in 385AD extolling 'the haven of a rural retreat' in contrast to an urban life where 'going ourselves every day to other people's houses, or waiting for others to come to us…we tear to pieces those who are not there…When our friends have left us, we reckon up our accounts, now frowning over them like angry lions, now with useless care planning schemes for the distant future… We buy clothes, not solely for use, but for display…A penny makes us merry, a halfpenny makes us sad.': a selection aimed, dare one suggest, at a target Loeb-Reader-audience of high-minded, retired country-dwellers (for potential buyers, one caveat, no rich cloth binding or tasteful, trademark jacket here, instead a glossy cover boasting Mark Copeland's 1997 oil-painting Rome was Built in a Day) customers who can peruse the Reader al fresco in a comfy chair.

The library has plangent critics. Early editions leave those reading in English at the mercy of second-rate or out-dated translations. Early censorship and archaic language persists – forsooths and thous yet tarry. Despite the (relatively recent) promise to revise translations every ten years, the slow process of updating and of refreshing footnotes can frustrate. Still, near-perfect Loeb translations exist – Martin West's Homeric Hymns and Jeffrey Henderson's Aristophanes excel – works of scholarship that may now be appreciated by the likes of Steven Speilberg and Martha Stewart; proud owners of Loeb's complete works. The university of Cambridge demonstrated some vision when in 1925 it honoured James Loeb with a LL.D: 'Omnibus Paradisium redonavit hospes noster, qui et doctis et indoctis Garecos et

Latinos bene editos belle redditos ministrant - Our guest has given back Paradise to us all, for he provides to both the learned and the unlearned the Greek and Latin authors well edited and beautifully translated.'

Last week I visited Blackwells' Bookshop in Oxford with a promise of a book for each child in tow. Our five year old, after a good half an hour patiently scanning shelves – and ignoring the Harry Potters, Narnians and Angelina Ballerinas screaming away at the far end of the room picked out a pillar-box red (red jacket = Latin, green = Greek) Loeb translation of Apuleius' Metamorphoses. 'This is a proper book' she announced. The youngster can't read much English, yet alone Latin, but as soon as she does there'll be a bit of explaining to do: in the Metamorphoses (and the new translation is particularly fruity) a young man turns into a donkey, enjoying all sorts of adventures, many wonderfully indecent. Thanks Mr.Loeb – your mission to expand [NB or 'to nourish' if you prefer] the hungry mind looks set to continue.

Excerpts For Inserts:

You will find Herodotus, 'the Father of History', laying the blame for the enmity between East and West at Helen of Troy's door:

'…(the Persians say) the Greeks were greatly to blame; for they invaded Asia before the Persians attacked Europe. "We think," say they, "that it is wrong to carry women off: but to be zealous to avenge the rape is foolish: wise men take no account of such things: for plainly the women would never have been carried away, had not they themselves wished it. We of Asia regarded the rape of our women not at all; but the Greeks, all for the sake of a Spartan woman [Helen], mustered a great host, came to Asia, and destroyed the power of Priam. Ever since then we have regarded Greeks as our enemies."
Persians 1.1 - 4

Another excerpt reminds us of the immediacy of reportage. Pliny the Younger transmits his uncle's eye-witness account of the eruption of Vesuvius in 79AD:

'They debated whether to stay indoors or take their chance in the open, for the buildings were now shaking with violent shocks, and seemed to be swaying to and fro as if they were torn from their foundations. Outside on the other hand, there was the danger of falling pumice-stones, even though these were light and porous; however, after comparing the risks they chose the latter…As a protection against falling objects they put pillows on their heads tied down with cloths. Elsewhere there was daylight by this time, but they were still in darkness, blacker and denser than any night that ever was, which they relieved by lighting torches and various kinds of lamp. My uncle decided to go down to the shore and investigate on the spot the possibility of any escape by sea, but he found the waves still wild and dangerous. A sheet was spread on the ground for him to lie down, and he repeatedly asked for cold water to drink. Then the flames and smell of sulphur which gave warning of the approaching fire drove the others to take flight and roused him to stand up. He stood leaning on two slaves and then suddenly collapsed, I imagine because the dense fumes choked his breathing by blocking his windpipe which was

constitutionally weak and narrow and often inflamed. When daylight returned – two days after the last day he had seen – his body was found intact and uninjured, still fully clothed and looking more like sleep than death.'
Pliny Letters 6.16 10 - 20

NB I would also suggest:

Lysistrata (from pg 61):
'Here goes then; no need to beat around the bush…' (Down to end of excerpt in Loeb)

Cicero – On Duties:
First paragraph (whole of pg 133 – top of page 135)

And Horace Ode 18
The blessings and dangers of wine (whole of Ode 18 – or just first paragraph if you are tight for space.)