Paul Gray

AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN

The Aeneid

Translated by Robert Fitzgerald

(Random House, 416 p.)

Virgil: firing a hero in the Homeric forge

Those who translate words from one language into another always find that truth and beauty cannot both be served. Something has to go. Voltaire's parting shot when he left Holland *("Adieu, canaux, canards, canaille!")* may be accurately rendered in English as "Farewell, canals, ducks, rabble!" The only thing missing is everything that made Voltaire's remark so witty and memorably alliterative in French. If a four-word *mot* successfully thwarts attempts to export it, the problems posed by an epic poem more than 10,000 lines long, written two millenniums ago in a language now deceased, proportionately more impossible.

In taking on such a work, Poet and Translator Robert Fitzgerald inherited these general difficulties and a few specific ones as well. Virgil's *Aeneid* is one of the two or three most influential texts in Western literature, yet it achieved such eminence in part through an accident of history. Latin retreated to monasteries and survived the Dark Ages in manuscript, while Greek was largely forgotten.

When the Renaissance rediscovered the originals of the Homeric epics, Virgil's reputation started to tarnish. The Greeks had clearly borne great gifts to the Roman poet. *The*

Aeneid now looked suspiciously like a pastiche. its first half, recounting the wandering of Aeneas and his vanquished colleagues after the fall of Troy, owed more than a little to *The Odyssey.* Its last six books, in which the hero wages war on Italian tribes and fulfills his divine destiny to found the Roman Empire, showed the bloody imprint of *The Iliad.* Furthermore, Aeneas himself, compared with the Homeric heroes Odysseus and Achilles, began to strike many readers as a stick-in-the-mud: *pius* (Virgil's repeated adjective), the kind of sobersides who would abandon the woman who loves him to her funeral pyre rather than miss out on his mission.

"I sing of warfare and a man at war." Fitzgerald's version of The Aneid's first words (*"Arma virumque cano"*) veers sharply away from the traditional reading in English, enshrined in the title of George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man.* Yet singing of arms and the man was not all that Virgil's fellow Romans in the 1st century B.C. would have understood him to mean. They had already been thoroughly schooled on who Aeneas was and what he had, in legend, accomplished; neither his identity nor his military prowess could have been in doubt. Fitzgerald's rendition of Virgil's famous introduction may offend purists. It is not, strictly speaking, literal, but something more than that: a recapturing of implicit meanings in explicit terms.

This explanatory impulse pervades Fitzgerald's *Aeneid* and brings both the story and its main character back to life. The translator does not attempt to reproduce Virgil's rolling hexameters, so sonorous in Latin and soporific in English. He chooses instead a blank verse limber enough to accommodate both dignity and verve. Through this medium, Aeneas can be seen again as he must have first appeared to contemporaries, who now just happen to speak English and live in the latter part of the 20th century.

The hero no longer creaks under the virtues attributed to him by centuries of interpreters. He is a man doomed to greatness, compelled to propitiate and suffer the capricious gods. Juno brings on the ruin of Troy and the deaths of many of Aeneas' loved ones, then persuades Aeolus, ruler of the winds, to blow up a storm that disperses Aeneas' escaping fleet. He comforts his drenched, surviving companions with words he does not believe: "So ran the speech. Burdened and sick at heart,/ He feigned hope in his look, and

inwardly/ Contained his anguish."

The notorious love affair with Dido, Queen of Carthage, is arranged by Venus, Aeneas' mother, who simply wants to guarantee her son's physical safety in a potentially hostile land. The goddess did not guess the damage her meddling would cause to Aeneas' reputation. But Fitzgerald's translation makes vivid the sufferings of both Dido and her anointed suitor: "Duty-bound,/ Aeneas, though he struggled with desire/ To calm and comfort her in all her pain." And he, "shaken still/ With love of her, yet took the course heaven gave him/ And went back to the fleet." However paraphrased, this brand of heroism is easier to admire than love. Fitzgerald's language gives Aeneas his due as a man, without going beyond the character Virgil portrayed: a weapon of national purpose fired in the Homeric forge.

This English version of a cool but fascinating epic seems flawless. (Fitzgerald, 72, has already done superb modern translations of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey.)* But such judgments are ephemeral. Tastes change; each era meets the classics on new ground. At the approach of the 18th century, John Dryden offered Virgil as a master of the heroic couplet: "Arms, and the man I sing, who, forced by Fate,/ And haughty Juno's unrelenting hate." During the Victorian era, Aeneas emerged in the English of William Morris and other writers as a Romantic brooder well versed in Wordsworth's *Ode to Duty*. Fitzgerald's version, a century hence, may seem equally dated. But if translations capture the essence of their culture, then this *Aeneid*, in its supple beauty and clarity, is the best news this age has had in a long time.

Excerpt

«She rolled her bloodshot eyes, her quivering cheeks
Were flecked with red as her sick pallor grew
Before her coming death. Into the court
She burst her way, then at her passion's height
She climbed the pyre and bared the Dardan sword—
A gift desired once, for no such need.
Her eyes now on the Trojan clothing there
And the familiar bed, she paused a little,
Weeping a little, mindful, then lay down
And spoke her last words:
'Remnants dear to me
While god and fate allowed it, take this breath
And give me respite from these agonies.
I lived my life out to the very end
And passed the stages Fortune had appointed.
Now my tall shade goes to the under world.
I built a famous town, saw my great walls,
Avenged my husband, made my hostile brother
Pay for his crime. Happy, alas, too happy,
If only the Dardanian keels had never
Beached on our coast.' And here she kissed the bed.
'I die unavenged,' she said, 'but let me die.
This way, this way, a blessed relief to go
Into the undergloom. Let the cold Trojan,
Far at sea, drink in this conflagration
And take with him the omen of my death!'

AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN

Source : Paul Gray, «An Officer and a Gentleman», in *Time*, August 29, 1983, p. 64.