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VIRGIL AND THE MEANING OF THE AENEID

Introduction

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The translation of Vergil's *Aeneid* into English and Scots[1] forms one of the most brilliants chapters in the history of English literature. It begins with William Caxton's translation ("Eneydos"), printed in 1490, of a French prose romance based on the *Aeneid*, first published at Lyons in 1483. Gavin Douglas, bishop of Dunkeld, next translated the *Aeneid* in 1553 into Scots couplets in a version hugely admired by Ezra Pound and still a significant document in its effect upon the activity as translators of the new Scots poets who have brought about a minor cultural renaissance in Scotland. The version of Books II and IV of the *Aeneid* (1557) by Henry Howard, earl of Surrey, is the vehicle by which blank verse was introduced to English poetry. Drawing both upon contemporary Italian translations of Vergil and upon Gavin Douglas' Scots *Aeneid*, Surrey created a terse and dignified heroic style which was to become a guide to Spenser and to assist in the formation of a general poetic style in English. Of thomas Phaer's *Aeneid* (Books I-VII, 1558; I-IX, 1562, completed by Twyne in 1573), done in one of the oldest meters in English, the vigorous fourteener, one can now say that it is a valiant attempt and certainly not the least attractive of versions. Richard Stanyhurst's translation of Books I-IV (1582-1583) "into English heroical verse" is a fantastic creation which can scarcely be read today without laughter; but in spite of its ridiculous colloquialisms, its amazing and picturesque mixture of bombast and common sense, it was a serious experiment in quantitative English verse such as was never attempted before or since at such great length. Here is Dido moving to the temple while Aeneas gazes at the Trojan frieze in Carthage:

> Whilst prince Aeneas these picturs woonderus heeded,
> And eeche pane throghly with stedfast phisnomye marcked,
> Too churche Queene Dido, thee pearle of bewtye, repayred:

[1] The first translation made in British Isles is the Old Irish "Imtheachta Aeniasa", made before 1400 and printed in 1907 by David Nutt (London), in the Irish Texts Society Series, 6.

Of liuely yoonchers with a galland coompanye garded.

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After Stanyhurst, the story of Vergil's translation becomes less colorful although no less active. Other translators in even greater numbers tackled the job: Sir Richard Fanshawe, John Dryden, Christopher Cranch, Charles Bowen, John Keats (whose schoolboy version in prose is lost), William Morris, John Conington, J. Jackson, James Rhoades, C. J. Billson, J. W. Mackail, Theodore Williams, and others have turned the *Aeneid* into verse or prose of great variety. Fanshawe translated into ornate Spenserian stanzas, quite un-Vergilian in their effect, Dryden into heroic couplets of much sprightliness but also much padding. William Morris used rapid fourteener couplets and Sir Charles Bowen graceful dactylic hexameter couplets.

Of nineteenth-century verse translations, those of the last two translators are probably the most readable now, not too archaic and stilted in language nor too bare and prosy to be endured. Bowen's version bears favorable comparison with another in dactylic hexameters, that of H. H. Ballard (2nd ed., 1911). For the first time in a translation of Vergil, Ballard attempted to make a good case for the English hexameter by using a number of syllables (not, of course, quantitative equivalents of the Latin words) equal to the syllables in each foot of the Latin verse, avoiding all mention of dactyls and spondees. His preface gave careful directions for reading his translation, at one time much read in schools. His analogy with musical notation was misleading, since music still preserves quantity as well as stress, which English verse (including his translation) has lost almost all sense of quantity and relies largely upon stress-accent, however ingeniously one may theorize about long and short English syllables. His lines show a high percentage of three-syllabled feet, perhaps more than Vergil employed; the articles "a" and "the" often serve as the second syllable in a foot of two syllables, producing a rather flat effect, while first feet in the line are frequently iambs, not trisyllables–again an un-Vergilian practice.

Current translations of the *Aeneid* into verse include those by Rolfe Humphries[2] and

[2] *The Aeneid of Virgil, a verse translation* (New York: 1951).

C. Day Lewis[3]. Humphries writes a blank verse which is unconventional, easy, colloquial, in a tempo that is rapid and flowing. There are, of course, passages of energetic action in the poem to which such a style lends itself admirably; but it is not adequate to convey the essential dignity and pathos, the tender sadness, of most of the *Aeneid*. This does not mean that Vergil is stuffy. But he does not use words which could properly be understood to mean *what the hell, sort of accidentally on purpose, lay off the threats, bossing the job, telegraphs it, burnt up* (meaning *vexed*), and *stalling*. It is perhaps impossible to maintain the full quality of tone which is peculiarly Vergilian in any translation; but such phrases certainly cannot achieve that tone.

C. Day Lewis uses a hexameter line of an uneven number of syllables ranging from twelve to seventeen but with six usually discernible stresses. This line has been devised in order to avoid the smooth monotony of the conventional hexameter as read in Longfellow's *Evangeline*; but in avoiding singsong regularity, a certain rough confusion of rhythm and an awkwardness of stress arise. The last two feet of the line generally lack the ripple of the more traditional English hexameter based on the dactyl plus trochee or spondee which normally close the Latin hexameter. Thus the flow of the line as felt in the consistently more regular last half of the original line, picking up tempo like a wave about to crash upon the beach, is checked in Day Lewis' version. The remedy for monotony is often clumsiness, although the general effect is not unpleasing. Finally, since his translation was made for broadcasting over the British radio, it can be read aloud more successfully than it can be read silently. In other words, it is a translation for the ear, not the eye, a distinct rarity in an eye-minded age.

The purposes of my translation are modest. I wish to avoid a language which, although modern, is also often un-Vergilian. I do not omit anything of importance or hastily condense details: whatever Vergil thought important enough to set down is not for the translator to delete. The verse form used in this translation varies from a long, loose line packed with words (but with only five beats of blank verse) to a short, spare pentameter that fits the mood and tempo of the particular passage where it is used. Vergil himself has

[3] *The Aeneid of Virgil, translated by C. Day Lewis* (New York: 1952).

determined when I should shift from one to the other of these varieties of verse; it is a modulation to which blank verse has lent itself increasingly since Milton's time and is the only practical equivalent in English for the classical Latin hexameter, at least as Vergil uses it. It is a fact borne out by much experiment in verse translation that the hexameter is not actually adaptable to English; its rhythm becomes intolerably clumsy and monotonous, even as original English poetry, and, in fact, often looks suspiciously loaded with plain padding. The *Aeneid* is more full of rapid action, continuous and almost unrelieved, with fewer transitional passages of description or reflection, than almost any other epic, despite a strong, specifically Roman, tendency toward rhetoric in the generally short speeches. For translating such a poem an English blank verse which can be shortened or lengthened where necessary in syllable count is the best meter I have found.

No translator of Vergil can escape the frequent problems posed by repeated words such as *arma* (which I usually translate *weapons*) and *acer*, or the difficulty, for example, of fitting the word *recognized* into an English line as the equivalent of *agnovit*. I have used Walter Janell's Teubner text[4] as a basis for the translation and have followed the commentaries of Conington[5] and T. E. Page[6] (the latter's handy school text from which I have borrowed a few phrases). There are certain expressions in the *Aeneid* which, inevitably, can be translated with only one set of words and in a fixed word order by any translator; I make no apology for them even when they sound a trifle flat. With Vergil as with Homer, what was once known as "elegance" of language is not an appropriate term. His language is almost always simple, hard, brief, and suited to his undeviating purpose: the account of the struggles which Aeneas had to undertake in order to found Rome. In fact, one of the reasons

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[4] *P. Vergili Maronis Opera post Ribbeckium tertium recognovit Gualterius lanell,* editio maior iterum recognita (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1930).

[5] *P. Vergili Maronis Opera. TheWorks of Virgil with a Commentary by John Conington,* in George Long, ed., Biblioteca Classica, 4th ed., Vol. II (London: 1884); 3rd ed., Vol. III (London: 1883).

[6] *The Aeneid of Virgil, edited with introduction and notes,* 2 vols. (London: 1894); reprinted (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1960).

why readers still like the poem in its breathless speed, catching one up in that whirlwind Vergil uses so often as a simile.

I wish to thank Smith Palmer Bovie, general editor of the Indiana University Greek and Latin Classics, for his very helpful suggestions toward removing some infelicities from the translation. With his own exquisite taste in these matters, as demonstrated by his verse translations of Vergil's *Georgics*[7] and the *Satires* and *Epistles* of Horace[8], he has saved me from some awkward phrases. I am also grateful to Mr. Robert Fitzgerald for a few remarks on my introduction. Professor George E. Duckworth's article, "Recent Work on Vergil, 1940-1956"[9], has been invaluable in helping me bring both the short bibliography and the notes up to date with the imposing mass of excellent scholarship on Vergil.

I wish to emphasize that the notes to this translation–the first, so far as I know, that have been provided by any translator since the Bohn Library Series in the Victorian age–are intended for the Latinless reader, not for the Latin scholar, in order to clear the way toward understanding among those who are experts neither in Latin nor in Vergil. A short account of the life and works of Vergil precedes the brief bibliography and the notes. A may of Aeneas' wanderings and a glossary of names complete the book.

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[7] *Virgil, The Georgics, a new translation* (Chicago, III.: University of Chicago Press, 1956).

[8] *Satires and Epistles of Horace, a new translation* (Chicago, III.: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

[9] *The Classical World*, 51 (1957-58).

Source : *The Aeneid an Epic Poem of Rome* translated by L. R. Lind, MXMLXIII, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1963, pp. xx-xxiv.