THE STORY OF ÆNEAS
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Virgil's Æneid
Translated into English Verse

BY

HENRY S. SALT
Formerly Scholar of King's College, Cambridge
and Assistant Master at Eton

CAMBRIDGE
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS
MCMXXVIII
To

MY FRIEND

G. BERNARD SHAW
PREFACE

I

The Æneid of Virgil falls naturally into two parts, the first six books corresponding in general outline with Homer's Odyssey, and the last six with the Iliad; but whereas in Homer the wanderings of Ulysses form a sequel to the battle-scenes of the Iliad, in Virgil the order is reversed, and the first half of the story is devoted to the trials and adventures which befall Æneas in his long voyage to Italy, the remainder to the war which he wages against the Italian tribes.

Virgil's Æneas, the legendary Trojan hero whom it pleased the Romans to claim as their ancestor, is a man who is divided at heart between two contending influences—on the one hand, his heaven-ordained mission, to convey his country's fallen gods to a new home in Italy; and on the other, his personal desires, his craving for renewed rest and happiness after the tragedy of Troy. In this struggle Dido stands as the type of the individual love that is in conflict with a national destiny; and, as such, her presence is strongly felt throughout the earlier books, while it wholly dominates the tense drama of the fourth, and is not finally lost to sight until the well-known passage in the sixth, where Æneas takes his last farewell of her in Hades. Thenceforth the personal impulse, always the weaker, is merged wholly in the national.

The imperial interest of the story was much heightened by making Carthage—the great rival city which, though destroyed for over a century before the Æneid was written, still figured largely in Roman imagination—the meeting-place between Æneas and the Phoenician queen. That the tale was mythical did not at all lessen its effect, for so was the whole tradition on which the Æneid was founded.

The three books of the Æneid which, if we may trust the story, Virgil himself read to Augustus Cæsar as his masterpieces, were the second, describing the fall of Troy;
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the fourth, the death of Dido; and the sixth, the descent into Hades. If it is in the sixth book that he reaches his highest level as poet, it must be owned that, as a work of art, the fourth is the most flawless; whether for its dramatic interest, or for the deep tragedy of its close, it will stand for all time as one of the greatest romances ever written on the theme of ill-fated love.

The second half of the Æneid, taken separately, is perhaps inferior to what precedes it, both in sustained human interest and in majesty of verse; but there are many splendid passages scattered throughout; and in the twelfth book (the death of Turnus) the poet attains a height which is nowhere surpassed. To conclude a work of art is always more difficult than to begin it; but here the Æneid is beyond criticism, for nothing could be finer than the manner in which the poem culminates in that great duel which decides the fortunes of a race. Some readers will think that the real hero of the latter books of the Æneid, as Dido is the heroine of the earlier ones, is the brave and single-hearted Turnus, who goes unwaved to the death to which he sees himself doomed by the Fates.

There is nothing archaic in Virgil’s treatment of his story; for, in spite of the introduction of supernatural agencies, the gods, as depicted in the poem, are quite anthropomorphous in character. Virgil, no less than Lucretius, though he lived and died nearly two thousand years ago, was essentially modern in spirit. His true and broad humanity, notwithstanding the references to a few savage customs of warfare or sacrifice, makes itself indirectly felt in many passages; and the number of his lines that have become proverbial and lasting possessions of mankind testifies to his deep hold on our affections. Perhaps the very reason why we sometimes question and resent the doings of his Æneas is that we are inclined to judge his heroes by the most advanced ethical standards; and it is the less amiable characteristics of the “man with a mission” that Æneas displays in some of the chief crises, notably in his betrayal and desertion of Dido.

It is doubtless Virgil’s human qualities, in conjunction
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with the transcendent charm of his style, that have caused him to be loved, as few writers have been, by many generations of readers, and still make us feel towards him as to no other old-world writer. He is a great poet not only of nature, but of the human heart. His medieval reputation was that of a mystic and necromancer; but he is as modern as Milton in his handling of ancient themes. Of all English writers, in fact, Milton is nearest akin to him; and what greater praise can be given to either?

It is, perhaps, only to those readers who are in some measure sympathetic that a lover of Virgil can convey his feelings about the Master; only a Virgilian can fully understand a Virgilian; for there is a sort of freemasonry in the cult which separates it from all the world beside. The tendency that has for many years existed in the schools, to depreciate Virgil as “less original” than Homer and than some other writers of antiquity, troubles the Virgilian no whit; to him the author of the Æneid is the greatest of the Classics, not only as a supreme craftsman in verse, but because he is a psychologist and a modern—as human as Euripides, and a consummate artist as well.

As a stylist, Virgil has no rival among his Latin fellow-countrymen, and but few in any language. It may be held that the Greek Iliad and Odyssey are greater epics than the Æneid, as being more primitive, more massive, and in a sense more original; but though it is true that in the construction of his story Virgil imitated Homer, the imitation was of a sort which, in the hands of a great artist, brings to the task an equal genius and originality of its own. In subtlety of mind, and in varied melody and rhythm, the Greek bard cannot be compared with the Latin, whose stately and sententious lines, rich in thought and still richer in the haunting beauty of their music, are indeed one of the greatest achievements of literature. And, after all, it is achievement, not “originality,” that is the final test in art; it is by the actual beauty of its work, not by the novelty of the scheme on which it is constructed, that a masterpiece must be appraised.
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For example, Virgil's treatment of the theme of death, in his pictures of the fabulous Hades, which as a poet he accepted for the purposes of his story, inevitably invites comparison not only with those passages in the De Rerum Natura of Lucretius in which a rationalistic explanation is given of the popular beliefs concerning the dead, but with the Homeric original; and the Virgilian poem, steeped as it is in a profound sense of mystery and darkness, quite transcends the much less impressive description given in the Odyssey.

II

But it is of the difficulty, the impossibility perhaps, of translating Virgil into English verse that I must here speak. The Latin hexameter being longer, by at least two syllables, than that which is its natural equivalent in English—the ten-syllabled iambic verse, in which the main characteristic of the Latin line, its grave measured harmony, can be most nearly reproduced—it follows that a translator must often have recourse to a larger number of lines or to a stricter compression of words. Efforts have been made to avoid this alternative by employing a long English line, such as the hexameter itself, or even a fourteen-syllabled verse; but it can hardly be said that the results have been encouraging.

For first, in regard to the hexameter, owing to organic differences between the two languages, this metre, which in Latin has a native dignity and charm, is apt in English to become a tedious jog-trot, irritating to a sensitive ear; so that, as a vehicle for translating Virgil, the very form in which he himself wrote is about the least appropriate that could be chosen.

Nor is the fourteen-syllabled verse any more successful; for though William Morris' rendering of the Æneid is the work of a poet, it fails to convey any impression of the Virgilian spirit or style; its long jerky lines do not in the least reflect the sustained roll of the hexameter. Such a metre may be well adapted for a Norse legend; but the genius of Virgil refuses to be domiciled in it.
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But if a longer verse than the decasyllabic does not in practice commend itself, still less does a shorter one—as, for example, that which Professor Conington used in his spirited and sympathetic translation of the Æneid, the metre of Scott's Lay of the Last Minstrel. All lovers of Virgil are indebted to Conington for the insight with which he caught the meaning of the Latin poet; but the rapid short-paced movement of the Scottish Border minstrelsy is a strange form, indeed, for reproducing the long, slow, rhythmic swing of the Virgilian lines. It raises a smile to find Conington saying of this metre: “I certainly do not pretend that it is the one true equivalent of the Virgilian hexameter.”

We come back, then, to the decasyllabic, as the English metre which, in spite of its lack of length, best corresponds with the Latin hexameter; and here it may be asked, Did not so great a poet as Dryden translate the Æneid? He did; but the “heroic” couplet, made famous by Dryden and Pope, is vitiated as a medium of translation by its cramped structure and monotony of rhyme. The unbroken sequence of the hexameter can rarely be portrayed in such a form; a few Virgilian passages lend themselves to it; but in the great majority the unfitness of the medium must defeat the skill even of a real poet. It is doubtless this fact which, in Dryden’s translation, accounts for the rarity of that “mighty line” which elsewhere in his poems is so frequent and so glorious.

Is rhyme, then, to be condemned and discarded? “I will venture to assert,” said Cowper, “that a just translation of any ancient poem in rhyme is impossible. No human ingenuity can be equal to the task of closing every couplet with sounds homonotous, expressing at the same time the full sense, and only the full sense, of the original.” In like manner other writers have inveighed against the trammels of “regularly recurring sounds”; and Mr Frederic Harrison complained that “rhyme embarrasses the writer and often irritates the reader.”

But here it has to be noted that Cowper’s objection, if valid, is obviously valid not against rhyme in itself, but
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against the rhymed heroic couplet; and so, with later critics, it is not the rhyme-sounds but their “regular recurrence” against which the complaint holds good. This point, a very important one, seems to have been overlooked in Mr Frederic Harrison’s conclusion that “a verse translation of the Æneid must be in the stately involuted blank verse of Paradise Lost and of The Excursion—i.e. iambic metre of ten syllables, without rhyme, without archaisms, without cryptic novelties.”

Before going farther, we have to face the fact that the adoption of blank verse is itself subject to one serious practical disadvantage. Be it granted that verse such as that of Milton would be the nearest approach in English to the Latin of Virgil. But who is going to compose it? Only great poets can write attractive blank verse; and as no translation of the Æneid which is devoid of attractiveness can merit to be called a translation, it is clear that in the absence of a Milton (and Miltons, unfortunately, are not less rare than Virgils) blank verse, however ideal in theory, must in practice fail, like other forms that have been mentioned.

This was long ago recognized by Dr Johnson, when he remarked, in his Life of Milton, that “he that thinks himself capable of astonishing, may write blank verse; but those that only hope to please must condescend to rhyme.” Conington, too, spoke truth when he wrote in the Preface to his Virgil: “Blank verse, really deserving the name, I believe to be impossible, except to one or two eminent writers in a generation.”

But there is a manner of rhyme—and here I come to the main point of my contention—which is not liable to the strictures justly passed on the cramped heroic couplet or on any regularly composed stanza—viz. an irregular sequence of lines such as that of Milton’s Lycidas. Herein a double advantage is secured for a translator; a much greater ease

\footnote{English Review, May, 1915. But in some correspondence which I had with him three years later he practically withdrew his objection to rhyme. Speaking of my version of Georgic IV, 464–527 (Orpheus and Eurydice), he wrote: “I think it is astonishingly successful. It seems to knock the bottom out of my canon of Virgilian translation.”}
and freedom in the choice of rhyme-sounds, and the possibility, as in blank verse, of adapting the length and fashion of the English sentence to those of the Latin—that is, of reproducing to some extent, and this is a matter of high importance, the graduated structure of those Virgilian periods which are built up with elaborate care, each successive verse, and each _cesura_ or pause in a verse, contributing to the final effect.

Be it noted, too, that under this arrangement it is not necessary that every single line should rhyme with some other; on the contrary, a blank verse may be left, now and then, with no offence to the ear of the reader, and at times with the positive advantage of preventing an accumulation of rhyme-sounds which might cloy. I have also in a few cases used the couplet-form, and I think with good results; viz. where a version had to be given of some solemn or formal utterance, such as an oracle, a prophecy, or the asseveration made by either party to a truce.¹ In such passages, where the Latin original is usually simpler and less involved than is Virgil’s wont, the objections to the rhymed couplet disappear, and its introduction lends variety to the poem.

It has been said that Virgil “ought to be translated more or less lineally as well as literally.”² There are certainly passages where it is even more necessary that the version should be lineal than literal; for example, in dealing with those terse, gnomic utterances, full of wisdom as of beauty, which have in many cases become proverbial, it is better to drop some of the words than to impair the conciseness of the line. On the other hand, there are verses of which it is impossible to give a lineal rendering without missing an essential part of their effect; and in such cases it seems the lesser evil to use more words in the English than to fail to convey the finer shades of the Latin. A translator will refuse

¹ E.g. on pp. 125, 152, 281, 282.
² Sir C. Bowen in the Preface to his _Virgil in English Verse_.

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to be bound by any rigid rule in these matters; for though
literalness is a great virtue, it must not be made into a fetish.¹

Indeed, the strictly literal may at times be even misleading,
so marked are the differences of idiom between the two
languages; and Virgil's frequent use of patronymics, of
distinctive epithets (such as pius), and of historical or
mythological allusions—familiar to Roman readers, but
needing explanation in English—would of itself preclude a
literal translation in verse. In prose it is otherwise; for the
first object of a prose rendering of a poem must be to give
the letter of the text; whereas a poetical version, however
great its difficulties and imperfections, does at least aim at
a more intimate and personal interpretation. A translator of
Virgil in verse may succeed in giving what no prose can ever
give—a glimpse, however distant, of the poet’s manner and
mood.

I would not, however, be misunderstood as in any way
disparaging the value of literalness; it is, in fact, much easier
to keep near to the sense of the original when, as in the form
which I have adopted, one is free from the shackles of
couplet or stanza, and the rhyme can fall early or late as may
be desired. Indeed, there are many passages which I think
could hardly be rendered more closely in blank verse than
as I have presented them.

If any apology be needed for this latest essay in the fields
of Virgilian translation, I would plead that as final success,
if ever to be obtained, must be founded upon many previous
failures, it cannot be wholly unprofitable to make a new
adventure along a less trodden path. What I have criticized
in my predecessors is not their workmanship but their
medium; what I view with satisfaction in my own attempt
is rather the medium than the work.²

¹ Thus Dryden, in the Dedication to his Æneid, avows his deter-
mination, if necessary, to "pursue the elegance and forsake the brevity."
² I have incorporated with these remarks the substance of the Intro-
duction to my translation of the fourth book of the Æneid, separately
published in 1926. That Preface was itself partly reprinted from an article
which originally appeared in the Fortnightly Review, February, 1923.
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Among the questions that face a translator of Virgil is that of how to deal with the “hemistichs,” or half-lines, of which there are about fifty in the Aeneid. A study of these, in relation to the passages where they occur, makes it difficult to maintain the old theory that they are mere gaps (“short-comings” is Conington’s word for them) in an unfinished poem, which the author intended to fill up at a later date; for some of them are as full of significance and beauty as the half-lines in Lycidas, and the rest seem designed to add to the general effect by breaking the monotony of the hexameters. I have therefore tried to reproduce them, when possible, in the passages where their purpose is evident. I have to thank Mr Hugh Macnaghten, Vice-Provost of Eton, for drawing my attention to this point, and to the error of regarding the Aeneid as in any sense an imperfect work.

I am also indebted for friendly encouragement and helpful suggestions to several other well-known scholars, among whom are Sir Herbert Warren, Master of Magdalen College, Oxford; Professor Gilbert Murray; Dr J. W. Mackail; and my old schoolfellow, Sir George Greenwood.

H. S. S.