

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-44578-9 - Virgil: The Eclogues and the Georgics
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BY
R. C. TREVELYAN

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To
 URSULA WOOD

*Within the cool depths of a beech-tree's shade,
 Long ago in my boyhood there I found
 Tityrus piping on his rustic reed
 Sweet woodland melodies. Long and long I listened
 Entranced; until he changed his tune and sang
 Of flocks and herds, the fruit-tree and the vine,
 Of ploughmen and of thrifty bees. And now,
 Presumptuously daring, this hard task
 Have I essayed, labouring to transplant
 These tender flowers of delicate Latin speech
 Into an alien soil. My task is ended.
 But whom shall it please? Who in this restless age,
 So ignorant of its own ignorance,
 Has need of the shy beauty and stateliness
 Of Virgil's Muse? Few surely.
 To most must it not seem
 A mere pedantic labour of fond love,
 A luxury, outmoded and unwanted?
 And then I think of you, my friend, remembering
 How for my toil you gave me hope and courage,
 Divining through the dim veil of my verses
 That antique Roman charm and grandeur, half-revealed,
 Which else to you were silent, unenjoyed.
 For you too are a servant of the Muses:
 Their garden is your heritage, but therein
 You are their labourer, with no reward
 Save freedom there to plant and rear new flowers and fruits
 For our delight and wonder, or to engraft
 Upon old stems new shoots.
 But whence the spirit of enchantment blows,*

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*What matter, so it but inspire the mind
 Of one fit to receive that sudden glory,
 And give it form and feature?
 Or rather of itself each winged thought
 Glides swift as light through dull familiar words,
 Kindling and weaving them till they become
 A garment for its beauty and its power.
 Happy then must those be, who in youth's prime
 Have sought and won that mastery of words
 By which alone the breath of poetry
 In all its infinite delicacies and pride
 May be clothed and revealed. Great is the word;
 Yet is the spirit greater. For if its breath
 Blows not, like a fading coal the word
 Fades and is dead. Then let the house be swept
 And garnished at all hours
 Against the arrival of its sovereign lord,
 The bride-groom of the mind, who unannounced
 In his own time shall come; whom we must watch
 And wait for night and day; and when he comes
 Must spend our toil to entertain him royally.
 With his whole soul and strength
 Did Virgil labour: so must we. With naught
 Less than perfection might he rest content.
 So, when he lay dying,
 From time to time he asked his friends to bring him
 The book-boxes wherein his Aeneid lay—
 With all its blemishes and incompletions,
 Its ambiguities and sublime defects—
 That he might burn it: but they shook their heads
 Weeping, though he besought them earnestly.
 Thus, like a lover still unsatisfied,
 Heart-broken, did death take him; but his book,
 That so long he had loved and laboured for,
 Death has no power to touch.*

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