

## *Versions of Virgil*

VIRGIL, THE GEORGICS, translated by Robert Wells (Carcanet New Press, Manchester, 1982). Hardback, £8.95. ISBN 0-85635-422-8.

VIRGIL, THE AENEID, translated by C.H. Sisson (Carcanet Press, Manchester, 1986). Hardback, £16.95. ISBN 0-85635-660-3.

To translate poetry into prose is always a folly, for poetry has its own particular procedures and logic. To attempt to turn poetry into poetry involves enormous risks, and every effort will be in some way a failure. But Robert Wells in his rendering of the *Georgics* comes very near indeed to giving us a poem for a poem. His is not a literal version, but again and again he succeeds in striking the right note in language which is plain yet resonant. This is the best poetic translation of the *Georgics* I know. The beautiful passage on spring (2.315–345) provides what I find a particularly striking example of Wells's method and art:

Pay no attention when busy neighbours warn you  
That your vines should be planted out before winter's end.  
What chance have the slips of taking hold in the soil  
When the north wind blows and a harsh frost seals the ground?  
Spring is your season, when the white bird returns  
And the long snake writhes in terror from its attack,  
Or that time in early autumn when the weather still holds  
But the year dwindles and the sun shines without warmth.  
Spring is the trees' best time, they live for the spring.  
Look how the soil swells, craving the lively seed,  
How the fostering sky lets go his pent up rains  
And body to body, with an enormous quickening,  
Pierces the earth to nourish all that she bears.  
The pathless thickets are resonant with birdsong.  
Animals return to their coupling at their settled times.  
Warm western winds stroke the soft bellies of the fields

And in everything the sap rises with tender desire.  
Plants lift more trustingly to the sun each day.  
The sprouting vine, unafraid of southern gales  
Or rain driven down by big winds from the north,  
Pushes out buds and unfolds leaf by leaf.  
It must have been like this at the world's beginning.  
I think of that early time when things took shape  
In their first integrity. It was original spring,  
The whitening days unflawed by winter winds.  
Then cattle first drank the light; the earthbound race  
Of men rose up head foremost from stony fields;  
Beasts were sent into the woods, stars into the sky.  
Young plants could never carry through their task of growth  
If there were not this respite between heat and cold  
When the sky looks welcomingly on the newborn earth.

C.H. Sisson is an Anglican, a patriot, and a high Tory of the kind that disappeared around 1649. He is also a poet and a man of letters who has produced some remarkable translations of Lucretius, Horace, Catullus, Du Bellay, La Fontaine, Racine, Gryphius, Heine. Now come his *Aeneid*. 'Of the contemporary versions,' he remarks in his introduction, 'I will say nothing, except that if any of them satisfied me I should not be offering this further attempt.' His medium is unrhymed pentameters and his English is contemporary and lucid. Here is Anchises greeting Aeneas in the Underworld:

But when he saw Aeneas  
Coming over the grass in his direction,  
He stretched out both his hands eagerly,  
Tears started on his cheeks, he cried out:  
'You have come at last, and filial devotion  
Has found the hard way as I knew it would...  
What dangers you encountered to be here!  
How I feared that the powers of Libya  
Might harm you in some way!'

Sisson regards Dryden as the greatest ever translator of Virgil's epic in English. His own contribution presents the matter of the original in

language which comes naturally to him. The reader who first encounters the *Aeneid* through Sisson will not have the distraction of mannered poeticism standing between him and the original. His chance of having the story work as it will on him will be much enhanced. Wells and Sisson, each in his own way, have performed admirably their chosen tasks which are distinctly different from one another in character and tone.

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