

VIRGILIAN PARODIES AND IMITATIONS

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The privilege of reading a second paper to a learned audience is fraught with hazards. Is one destined to overhear an echo of the question put to Francisco and Bernardo on the chilly ramparts of Elsinore - "What, has this thing appear'd again tonight?" Or is one to be involved in the Scylla-Charybdis dilemma where Scylla represents the virtual certainty that no-one remembers or would wish to be reminded of the previous occasion, and Charybdis the horrifying possibility that someone does.

If I were to be so old-fashioned as to append a classical motto to the *farrago Vergiliana* which I am setting before you, I should plump for *dulce est desipere in loco*, though aware of the presumptuousness of the predicate *dulce* and conscious that scholars with a proper sense of *gravitas* - not to speak of those 'learned philologists who chase / A panting syllable through time and space' - would object that the Institute of Classical Studies is hardly an appropriate venue for a display of *desipientia*!

Only the flimsiest of partitions separates the gravity of sublime utterance from the wicked and wounding parody. The practice of quoting and misquoting Virgil began in the poet's own lifetime, and recognition of this fact both enriches and enlivens our study of Imperial Latin. The ability to produce a convincing specimen of another man's style has been admired in all ages - from Aristophanes' "Frogs" to Eliot's "Practical Cats". For the sources of my illustrations I have gone, as Falstaff for his ragged army, to the highways and byways of our literature. If I should mention authors or episodes outside your ken, it may be matter for congratulation - if you recall that 'not to know some trifles is a praise'.

One of the less publicised benefits of a classical education is that - especially if you are old enough not to find a pun too excruciating - you may enliven your correspondence by a deliberate mistranslation of a piece of Latin familiar to your friend.

*sic canibus catulos similis, sic matribus haedos
noram, sic parvis componere magna solebam.*

Sir Henry Wotton, writing in 1589 to his brother Edward, happily perpetrated a species of *paronomasia* which - *expertus loquor*! - the young find particularly nauseating. "All these great matters," he wrote, "did Mr. Parvis compose - *sic Parvis componere magna solebat* - in another sense." This sheds an interesting light on a Provost of Eton who could give to the world such gems as "You meaner beauties of the night" and "How happy is he born and taught".

My appreciation of the second Eclogue has suffered from my addiction to the works of Byron, not least to his great epic-satire. Stanzas 40 to 45 of the first canto are devoted to Don Juan's classical education and in them are embedded such pearls of criticism as the following -

"And then what proper person can be partial
To all those nauseous epigrams of Martial?"

Virgil almost scores full marks for his freedom from what the Don finds morally reprehensible -

"But Virgil's songs are pure, except that horrid one
Beginning with 'Formosum pastor Corydon'."

The same Eclogue provides a motto for Byron's "Literary Eclogue", "The Blues". I refer to the injunction *nimum ne crede colori*, which Arthur Platt has said is the equivalent of 'Beauty is but skin deep'. The first scene is laid outside a college lecture-room in London I hope I may be forgiven a short quotation from it -

Inkel. You wed with Miss Lilac! It would be your perdition:
She's a poet, a chymist, a mathematician.

Tracy. I say she's an angel.

Inkel. Say rather an angle.

If you and she marry, you'll certainly wrangle.

With this awareness of the context we are prepared for Byron's expansion of Virgil's words -

O trust not, ye beautiful creatures, to hue,
Though your hair were as red as your stockings are blue.

We have mentioned a numerate female and are reminded of an occasion when the formidable W.E. Heitland unbent sufficiently to celebrate Miss Fawcett, who in 1890 was placed "above the Senior Wrangler". Remembering his Aeneid V (*notumque furens quid femina possit*) he gave his doggerel the title "Sapiens quid femina possit". Incidentally when C.S. Calverley translated Cowper's Boadicea into Alcaics he called his version "Furens quid femina possit".

C.S.C.'s Carmen Saeculare (which I annotated for the Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical Society: Literary and Historical Section, Vol.VI 1950, pp. 472-481) and which drew from J.K. Stephen these words -

"Ripe scholar! Virgil's self would not be chary
Of praises for thy Carmen Seoulaire." (Lapsus Calami, 1891)

- blended Ecl. II, 17 (*o formose puer, nimum ne crede colori!*) with Aen. IV, 172 (*coniugium vocat, hoc praetexit nomine culpam*) to produce the following delicious couplet -

O fumose puer, nimum ne crede Baconi:
Manillas vocat, hoc praetexit nomine caules.

Here the unscrupulous Cambridge tobacconist, Bacon, immortalised in C.S.C.'s "Ode to Tobacco", is said to be selling cabbage-leaves as genuine Manilla

cigars. Though numerous phrases from the Eclogues (e.g. *nobis deus otia fecit, paulo maiora canamus*, etc.) serve as the mottoes or even the titles of works by poets as varied as Byron, Clough, Cowper, Crabbe, Cowley, Flatman, Gay, Hughes, Milton Pope and Prior, humorous applications are rare and we must go rather to the *pingue solum* of the Georgics.

Sometimes an adapter or parodist incorporating into his poem a *locus Vergilianus* seems to go out of his way to ensure that the map-reference, as it were, is identical in both cases. This is certainly true of the numerous Georgics which created a glut on the British book-market in the 18th century. No less intriguing to the poetasters who all too frequently *crassa Minerva* churned out their too-faithful copies of Virgil's masterpiece was the periodic structure of familiar passages. Compare, for example, Georgics I, 1-5 with the poem of "The Hop-Garden", a Georgic by Christopher Smart (1722-91) -

"The land that answers best the farmer's care,
And silvers to maturity the hop;
When to inhume the plants; to turn the glebe;
And wed the tendrils to th' aspiring poles;
Under what sign to pluck the crop, and how
To cure and in capacious sacks infold,
I teach in verse Miltonian."

Smart's debt to Virgilian syntax and language is obvious, but notice too the claim to follow Milton. Imitation of Miltonian style is a prominent feature of much 18th century versification in the didactic tradition, for "Paradise Lost" was deemed to teach the noblest lessons in the noblest words. One of the best and one of the most truly Virgilian of these writers was John Philips whose poem "Cyder" (1708) has been described as 'the first blank verse poem of importance since Milton'

James Grainger's West Indian Georgic, "The Sugar Cane" (1763) has attained the unwelcome distinction of extensive quotation in "The Stuffed Owl". On the fringe of the Johnsonian circle he read aloud at Reynold's house to the vast amusement of Johnson and Boswell an exordium which went thus - "Now, Muse, let's sing of rats." The preface of "The Sugar Cane" is a fair sample of the whole work -

"What soil the cane affects; what care demands;
Beneath what soil to plant; what ills await;
How the hot nectar best to crystallize;
And Afric's sable progeny to treat:
A Muse, that long hath wandered in the grove
Of myrtle-indolence attempts to sing."

The negro slaves, "Afric's sable progeny", are treated in a manner reminiscent rather of Cato and Columella than of Seneca, but even if we are able to put out of mind economic and social questions, our mind finds relief from dullness only in the frequent alarming lapses from good taste.

A short and jolly Georgic, light of touch and free from the tedium of over-elaboration, is John Gay's "Trivia; or the Art of Walking the Streets of London" (1715). Again the opening leans heavily on *Quid faciat laetas segetes* -

"Through winter streets to steer your course aright,
How to walk clean by day, and safe by night,
How jostling crowds with prudence to decline,
When to assert the wall, and when resign,
I sing: thou, Trivia, goddess, aid my song,
Through spacious streets conduct thy bard along."

Sometimes an appropriate Virgilian quotation successfully decorates an elegant prose passage. If the fine writing is deliberately exaggerated, the intended comic effect is heightened. We must all have our favourite instances. Mine is chosen from a wish to introduce to a wider circle that brilliant classical parodist 'Father Prout' (the Rev. Francis Mahony of Cork, 1804-66), 'an Irish potato seasoned with Attic salt'. In one *jeu d'esprit* he reflects on the miasmatic gloom of November and the hideous situation of mankind if in that murky month no article from his cheerful pen were to lift the heavy pall of darkness. "Sorrowful indeed," he writes, "would be the condition of mankind, and very deplorable the November chapter of accidents, if in addition to sources of sublunary desolation over which we have no control, Father Prout were, like the sun, to obnubilate his disk, veil his splendour, and withdraw the light of his countenance from a gloomy and disconsolate world;

*caput obscura nitidum ferrugine textit,
impiaque aeternum timuerunt saecula noctem.*

Then indeed would unmitigated darkness thicken the already palpable obscure; dullness would place another padlock on the human understanding, and knowledge be at one grand entrance fairly shut out. But no! such a calamity, such a 'disastrous twilight' shall not befall our planet, as long as there is MS in 'the chest' or shot in the locker. Generations yet unborn shall walk in the blaze of Prout's wisdom, and the learned of our own day shall continue to light the pipe of knowledge at the *focus* of this intense luminary."

A brief glimpse at Pope's technique in fusing Virgilian passages will be seen if we recall Geo.I, 481-3 -

*Proluit insano contorquens uertice siluas
fluuiorum rex Eridanus camposque per omnis
cum stabulis armenta tulit.*

and *ibid.*, IV, 372-3 -

*Eridanus, quo non alius per pingua culta
in mare purpureum uiolentior effluit annis.*

In Book II of the Dunciad Pope intended us to call to mind the funeral games of Aeneid V when he described the contests for fustian poets, disputants and party hacks, in which the appropriately-chosen prizes will be won by those whose belly-flop into the foetid slime of the Fleet Dike disturb the most mud -

"This labour passed, by Bridewell all descend,
(As morning pray'r and flagellation end)
To where Fleet Ditch with disemboing streams
Rolls the large tribute of dead dogs to Thames,
The king of dykes! than whom no sluice of mud
With deeper sable blots the silver flood."

The second Georgic begins thus -

*Hactenus aruorum cultus et sidera caeli;
nunc te, Bacche, canam.*

This opening is unmistakably imitated in Claudian, XXII, I - *Hactenus armatae laudes*, followed in line 6 by *principio* and line 9 by *nam*, as in Geo.II we find *principio* (line 9) and *namque* (line 10). But *hactenus* cast its spell over the British didactic poets. The second book of John Armstrong's "Art of Preserving Health" begins -

"Enough of air. A desert subject now
Rougher and wilder rises to my sight."

Except when the learned doctor almost bursts a blood-vessel in expressing his detestation of the athletic fool or fulminates against those who sap their strength by over-indulgence and "in the wanton arms / Of twining Lais melt their manhood down", he offers little that is not soporific. The West Indian Muse begs again to be quoted. Virgil, I need not remind you, knew that every farm must have a muck-heap, but - to quote Addison - "he tossed about his dung with an air of majesty". He does not make poor Grainger's mistake of thrusting it under the divine nostrils of the Pierides -

"Enough of composts, Muse, of soils enough."

Perhaps the bard thought that so magnificent a chiasmus would disarm criticism! Grainger's second book opens even more startlingly with the ambiguous phrase - "Enough of culture."

Virgil's well-known passage on how to choose a horse begins at line 72 of Georgics III. It is more than a coincidence that the doctor's advice on the selection of a negro slave begins also at line 72 -

"Must thou from Afric reinforce thy gang?
Let health and youth their every sinew firm;
Clear roll their ample eyes; their tongue be red;
Broad swell their chest; their shoulders wide expand;
Not prominent their belly; clean and strong
Their thighs and legs, in just proportion rise.
Such soon will brave the fervours of the clime;
And free from ails that kill the negro train,
An useful servitude will long support."

Geo.IV, 6-7 is rendered thus in Dryden's translation of 1697 -

"Slight is the subject, but the praise not small,
If heaven assist, and Phoebus hear my call."

Lines 5-6 (almost a numerical parallel) of Pope's Rape of the Lock (1712) run as follows -

"Slight is the subject, but not so the praise,
If she inspire, and he approve my lays."

Incidentally the same preface contains clear references to Geo.IV, 86 (cf. "What mighty contests rise from trivial things" and *hi motus animorum atque haec certamina tanta*) and Aen.I, 11 (cf. "And in soft bosoms dwells such mighty

rage" and *tantaene animis caelestibus irae*). Some seventy years later a lady fond of blank verse asked a poet to compose a poem in it on the subject of "The Sofa". Lines 6 and 7 of his seven line invocation (the same length as in Geo.IV) are -

"The theme though humble, yet august and proud
Th' occasion - for the Fair commands the song."

The Fair was Lady Austen, whom he met in 1781 at the age of 50. The muse visited Cowper more assiduously than she visited the Mantuan, for 773 verses (including the famous 'God made the country and man made the town') were speedily produced; five books on related themes followed within fourteen months, the whole receiving the not unsuitable title of "The Task". Before we bid it farewell let us remember that Cowper's homage to the author of the *laudes Italiae* (Geo.II, 136-76) is the celebrated passage ("The Task", II, 206-254) which begins "England, with all thy faults, I love thee still -".

Of the so-called digressions in the Georgics it is doubtful if any is more admired than the loving description of the *Corycius senex* in Book Four. In the affections of the eighteenth century he had a rival, a rival who followed him *non passibus aequis*, in the person of Claudian's *senex Veronensis*, and with him he is sometimes compared. In a letter to Wm. Johnson Temple, Boswell refers to Sir Alexander Dick as "a *Corycius senex*, quite a classical man and much of an Italian in pleasantness of disposition", adding that he possessed a fine seat just a mile from town - a striking contrast to the *pauca relioti iugera ruris* of the Tarentine beekeeper! In the "Letter to the People of Scotland against the Attempt to diminish the Number of the Lords of Session" Boswell wrote "As long as British literature and British politics shall endure, it will be said of Edmund Burke *Regum aequabat opes animis*". In his seventies the same author returned to this Virgilian tag. "Let them look inwards and be satisfied," he said, "recollecting with conscious pride what Virgil finely says of the *Corycius senex*, and which I have in another place with truth and sincerity applied to Mr. Burke - *Regum aequabat opes animis*." The quotability of Virgil's thought had of course been seen by Seneca, who wrote (De Beneficiis, I, vii) *non nunquam enim magis nos obligat, qui dedit parva magnifice, qui regum aequavit opes animo, qui exiguum tribuit sed libenter, qui paupertatis suae oblitus est, dum meam respicit*.

Praise of the Tarentine veteran may take the form of 'left-handed compliment' when it is indirectly employed to stress the alleged deficiencies of the Aeneid. Let us hear again Father Prout, the erudite Jesuit from Cork. "*Ille ego qui quondam* is an old Latin formula, first used in the reign of Augustus, to connect the epic cantos of the warlike Aeneid with a far more polished and irreproachable poem, its agricultural predecessor. Virgil (something like Lord Althorp when he indulges in a day-dream and thinks posterity will forgive his political blunders in consideration of his excellent breed of cattle) sought thus to bolster up the manifest imperfections of his heroic and epic characters by a wrong reference to the unexceptionable Meliboeus and to that excellent old Calabrian farmer whose bees hummed so tunefully under the lofty towers of Oebalia. This is an old trick: it is part of the tactics of literature, well understood by that awfully numerous fraternity, the novel writers, who never fail on the title-page of each successive production to mention some

previous performance of glorious memory."

Dryden's reasons for omitting from his Aeneid the disputed verses Ia - Ie of the first book are set out in his dedication to the Lord Marquis of Normanby, where after being obliged to display the commodity he is so reluctant to pronounce saleable he damns what he describes as 'these notorious botches' in the following words - "If there be not a tolerable line in all these six (sc. the three couplets of his translation) the prefacer gave me no occasion to write better."

But *ille ego qui quondam* and its fellow-culprits were accepted as genuine by many of Virgil's admirers. The first four words of the preface of Paradise Regain'd translate literally these Latin words -

"I who ere while the happy garden sung,
By one mans disobedience lost, now sing
Recover'd Paradise to all mankind."

That was in 1671. A century later Cowper in the first book of The Task imitated the rejected preface of the Aeneid; though, if the words are carefully examined, it will be clear that he had also in mind the 'sphragis-poem' (Geo. IV, 559-566) with its miniature autobiography -

"I sing the Sofa, I who lately sang
Truth, Hope and Charity, and touched with awe
The solemn chords, and with a trembling hand,
Escap'd with pain from that adventrous flight,
Now seek repose upon an humbler theme."

A little annotation may be helpful here. Truth, Hope and Charity were composed between Jan., 1781 and July of that year; The Sofa was begun in July, 1783. The phrase 'adventrous flight' is a conscious borrowing from the prologue of Paradise Lost and suggests the mock-heroic tone of the poem. In the ambiguity of 'seek repose upon' we have a delightful example of the *molle atque facetum* in the Olney poet. But by placing 'I sing the Sofa' (= *Arma uirumque*) before 'I, who lately sang' (= *Ille ego qui quondam*) does he intend to keep us guessing about his own views on the authorship of Aen., I, Ia - Ie? Nearly eighty years before Milton Edmund Spenser had reproduced in the first stanza of The Faerie Queene the verses in question -

"Lo I the man, whose Muse whilome did maske,
As time her taught, in lowly Shepheards weeds;
Am now enforst a far unfitter taske,
From trumpets sterne to chaunge mine oaten reeds,
And sing of Knights and Laides gentle deeds."

I introduce Spenser out of chronological order because I should like to consider for a while Aen., I, 8-II (*Musa, mihi causas memora tantaene animis caelestibus irae?*) In 1590, six years before The Faerie Queene was published, Spenser had dedicated his epic burlesque Muioptomos: or the Fate of the Butterflie (a work of 440 verses, almost as long as the Culex of which Spenser wrote an expanded version entitled Virgils Gnat) to 'the right worthy and vertuous ladie, the Ladie Carey'. The fable concerns a handsome butterfly called Clarion who is piteously enticed into the sticky web of his arch-enemy,

the spider Aragnoll. Clarion's fate, expressed in the closing lines, recall Aen.XII, 951-2 -

*ast illi solvantur frigore membra
uitaque cum gemitu fugit indignata sub umbras.*

The lepidopteron expires thus -

"his deepe groning spright,
In bloodie streames foorth fled into the aire,
His bodie left the spectacle of care."

Mucopotmos, after the quaint alliteration of the opening line "I sing of deadly dolorous debate" concludes its invocation thus -

"Reveale to me, and all the meanes detect,
Through which sad Clarion did at last declyne
To lowest wretchedness; and is there then
Such rancour in the hearts of mightie men?"

To Pope's imitation of *tantaene animis caelestibus* *trae* reference has been made on an earlier page.

Lord Byron, in the Postscript to the Second Edition of English Bards and Scotch Reviewers, alludes to the wvagery of the Edinburgh Reviewers before quoting Aen., I.11. As he is on the eve of departure to the Near East he hopes to light his pipe in Persia with the next number of the offending journal. That this quotation was a favourite of his may be seen by its humorous abbreviation in Canto XII, stanza 33 of Don Juan.

All of us have our favourite applications of classical authors - even Virgil must not be exempt. Indeed his skill as a parodist is unquestioned. I have tried to show you a few of mine. If I have at times turned too abruptly from the well-kept highways of "Eng.Lit." to unadopted cul-de-sacs and even to muddy bridle-paths I ask your pardon. May I summarize my attitude in two hexameters a friend of Virgil very nearly wrote -

*o imitatores, fidum pecus, ut mihi saepe
lusum, saepe iocum uestrae mouere Camenae!*