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Why Virgil?

The Presidential Address 1990

I know why I am here, or at least why I was invited here. A year ago, I was interviewed by Miss Sue Lawley on the radio programme 'Desert Island Discs', and I was asked, what book I would choose to take with me in my protracted, distant insulation—the works of Shakespeare and the Bible being already there, left behind (we must presume) by some previous castaway. I replied that I would choose the works of Virgil. This provoked some of my hearers to remonstrance, even to ridicule. To them such a choice seemed arcane, perhaps pretentious. To the members of this society I can safely presume that it would not. As far as I was concerned, it was an excogitated and, I believe, a reasoned choice, and I shall begin my address by briefly rehearsing my excogitations and giving my reasons.

After all, I said to myself, I do not know how long I shall be on this island, how long I shall have to wait before my improvised flag, or my plaintive message scrawled in the sand or sent out to sea in a bottle, draws a passing vessel to my rescue. So I do not want a book which is despatched in a single reading. I must have a book which, in this sense, is not finite, which I can take up and read and re-read and discover new rewards in each reading of it. I do not want a work of mere utilitarian or decorative information, or of evanescent amusement, or indeed of profound and difficult thought written in opaque, rebarbative prose. What I want is a work of literature, composed by a writer who has known how to use language with seductive felicity— such felicity that he can constantly invite us back again; and moreover a work of some elevation of mind, to distract me from the exhausting and banausic daily routine of climbing trees in order to collect berries or escape from alligators, fishing for crabs, coping with mosquitos, and keeping the essential protective fire from going out. I want, while reading, to forget those vulgar necessities,

to rise above thos discomforts, and to be able to say, with Izaak Walton (or whoever he was quoting):

> I was that moment lifted above earth
> And possess'd joys not promis'd at my birth.

It seemed to me that Virgil fitted this bill.

There was also, I must admit, an element of recantation in my choice; for I would not always have chosen thus. Half-a-century ago, during the war, I felt, at times, very frustrated. The news from the battle fronts was depressing; at home the enemy bombs were falling; and I am afraid that I, like many of my fellow-officers in the Secret Intelligence Service, was impatient—perhaps too impatient— of what we saw as the obstructive prejudices of our superiors. From this frustration I found relief, whenever possible, in literature: I am amazed now, when I look back, at the amount of literature I was then able to read in mere snatches of time; and I owe a great debt to that fastidious man of letters, Logan Pearsall Smith, whom I had come to know, and whom I often visited in London. By his conversation and his library, from which he was a generous lender, and of which I afterwards inherited a part, he introduced me to an even wider world of literature. But one day, in his house, I committed a dreadful solecism. I cannot remember the circumstances: I only recall the crime. I described Virgil as 'a cissy poet'.

Immediately I sense the horror of this audience, feel the *frisson* which runs through it—indeed, find myself participating in it. How could I ever have uttered such a shocking phrase? Logan, of course, was outraged. He accused me of blasphemy. 'How I shall rejoice at the Day of Judgment,' he afterwards wrote, on recalling the episode, 'when I hear you sentenced to roast in the seats of the reprobates and doomed to dwell with devils for eternal ages!' Well, I have repented since then, and hope to escape that fate, and I am now, in effect, reading my recantation.

The process of conversion was eased for me when I discovered, several years later, that I was not alone in my transgression. In 1785 there was published a volume entitled *Letters of Literature by Robert Heron esq.* Not many of you, I suspect, have read it. The letters were imaginary, a literary exercise, as was the alleged writer of them, 'Robert Heron'. The author was in fact John Pinkerton, a Scotchman, who would afterwards become one of the ablest, though also one of the most eccentric, of Scotch

antiquaries. Among his eccentricities were schemes to improve the English language by adding smooth Italian terminations to our rough Anglo-Saxon words, and to improve the Scottish race by drastically eliminating the whole Celtic population and restoring the country to its true owners, the Picts, who, he believed, were Goths and, as such, members of a master race. At the time when he published his imaginary *Letters*, he was twenty-seven years old—exactly my age when I uttered my blasphemy. In the course of his book, among other literary judgments, he dared to criticise, in a very patronising manner, the great work of Gibbon, of which the first three volumes had appeared. When Gibbon read the book—we know that he read it—I imagine that he was not much pleased to be told that the style of his own work was 'rather incorrect . . . and even sometimes puerile', and that his famous Conclusions on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West were 'more worthy of an old woman who had been frightened into hysterics' by a sixpenny pamphlet 'than of a man of science'. What must have shocked Gibbon even more was Pinkerton's even more patronising, not to say contemptuous, opinion of Virgil.

'Can a work live long,' Pinkerton had asked, 'which is defective in style?' and he had answered 'impossible'. Then, giving examples to illustrate his answer, he concluded magisterially, 'style has saved Virgil entirely, who has not the most distant pretence to any other attribute of a poet'. Having thus trailed his coat, he looked forward to trouble, and so, in later letters in the same volume, 'to vindicate my opinion from the charge of rashness', he expanded his thesis. In all the works of Virgil, he wrote, there was 'not one ray of invention'. The *Eclogues*, 'considered as works of invention, are beneath all contempt'. On the *Georgics*, so much admired by the eighteenth century, he was even more severe: didactic poetry was anyway 'the lowest of all kinds of poetry', and these were particularly ridiculous examples of it, addressing 'country farmers' in language quite unintelligible to them, maladroitly interspersed with gross flattery of Julius Caesar and Augustus, 'superstitious offerings on the altar of slavery'. The *Aeneid*, said Pinkerton, warming to his theme, was worse still, a servile copy of Homer—the first six books being based on the *Odyssey*, the last six on the *Iliad*—but of course vastly inferior and often downright silly. 'Not one sentiment or image in all the works of Virgil,' wrote Pinkerton, 'but may be found in Homer or other Greek poets.' The most that could be said for him was that, at times, he rose to the level of Ovid ('but who ever said Ovid was a poet?') and that he

'displayed a great skill in the mechanical part of poetry'. That indeed had saved him, at least in the schools and academies to which his fame was now confined; for his style, Pinkerton admitted—'the pickle that has preserved his mummy from corruption'—is 'pure and exquisite'—though unfortunately, he hastened to add—overdone: too mannered, too precious. Virgil was, in fact, when Pinkerton came to sum him up, 'a tinsel poet', dealing in false ornament, put on to please Maecenas, who, as we all know—as Augustus himself admitted,—'was fond of tinsel to excess'.

When I read these shocking sentiments, I recognised that they were in fact—though more radically expressed—the same which I, at the same age, had entertained and rashly uttered. I too had seen Virgil as an essentially unoriginal, derivative poet, whose sole virtue lay in his style, and that style had seemed to me mannered, precious, Alexandrian, decadent. Looking back, I recognised my impertinence. I saw myself as Pinkerton.

Gibbon, of course, like Logan, was shocked by Pinkerton's heresy. Gibbon loved Virgil whom he described as 'my favourite poet', and understood him better than most of his contemporaries. He made very perceptive comments on him in his diaries and in his earliest work, his *Essai sur l'Étude de la Littérature*, and by 1770, when he wrote his *Critical Remarks on the sixth book of the Aeneid*, against the presumptuous fantasies of Bishop Warburton, he had read Virgil, he tells us, thirty times. But Gibbon was a magnanimous man, and four years later, when he read Pinkerton's *Lives of the Scottish Saints*—a work of real erudition and originality on the Dark Age of Scotland—all was forgiven. Indeed Gibbon became Pinkerton's patron. He wrote to him, as Pinkerton records, though personally unknown to him, in the most flattering terms, and invited him to become his coadjutor in his last projected undertaking: a plan to imitate the great Benedictine scholars of France and publish, in a scholarly series, the early chronicles of England. They met, discussed and planned. But then Gibbon had to undergo an operation, from which he did not recover. His death frustrated the project; but in his papers was found the prospectus which he had drawn up for it and in which he warmly recommended Pinkerton as his editor. Aware that that name might 'provoke some resentment and revive some prejudices', he explained away Pinkerton's early eccentricities. Those, he said, were 'juvenile sallies which candour will excuse' and which Pinkerton himself 'is the first to condemn and will perhaps be the last to forget. Repentance

has long since propitiated the mild divinity of Virgil, against whom the rash youth, under a fictitious name, had darted the javelin of criticism; he smiles at his reformation of our English tongue; . . . the Goths continue to be his chosen people, but he retains no antipathy to a Celtic savage' . . .[1]

So Virgil, once again, triumphed over his critic. And yet the criticism will not die: indeed, on particular points, it is surely irrefutable. Can we really deny Pinkerton's charge that the characterisation of the Aeneid is poor, that the imitations of Homer and other Greek poets, both in substance and in form, are obvious: that the storm at sea, the conversations of the gods, the funeral games for Anchises, the fire among the ships, the visit to Hades, the shield of Aeneas, and many other episodes are direct copies from Homer; that what Pinkerton called 'the affected and silly episode of Nisus and Euryalus' is a weak variant of Homer's *Doloneia*, as the death of Pallas is of that of Patroclus and the battle between Aeneas and Turnus is of that between Achilles and Hector? At one point Pinkerton cites Gibbon as expressing surprise that 'no Greek writer whatever, though many are posterior to Virgil, even thought him worth mention'. 'The cause,' says Pinkerton, 'is evident': the Greeks looked upon Virgil 'as a paltry translator of their own immortal poet,' and naturally regarded him with 'utter scorn'; what would we think if a French author were to publish a French translation of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* 'frittered down into a foppish production in six books, and desired the world to look upon it as an epic poem?'

Pinkerton at least allowed Virgil the essential preservative of style. Other critics did not even allow that. In a footnote to the last volume of his *History*, Gibbon cites an English critic who 'in our own times . . . has accused the *Aeneid* of containing *multa languida, nugatoria, spiritu et maiestate carminis heroici defecta*: many such verses as he, the said Jeremiah Markland would have been ashamed of owning'. The said Jeremiah Markland was a reputable scholar, a Fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge, who had been praised by Bentley and would be praised by Housman. His confident judgment reminds me of one of my own classical tutors at Oxford who, one day, offered me as an ideal model of Latin verse, in some particular matter, some hexameters of Virgil—only to pull himself suddenly up and correct that attribution: 'how silly of me!' he exclaimed, 'I had forgotten—those verses are not Virgil: I wrote them myself . . .'

Like Pinkerton, I revised my early view of Virgil long ago. I have not, like Gibbon, read him thirty times, but I have returned to him often, and the task you have imposed on me has supplied an occasion to re-read him *in toto*. But always, at each reading, I find myself asking the same question: what precisely is the quality which has enabled Virgil, again and again, to assert, without argument—indeed often against persuasive arguments—his invincible superiority? It is not the depth or power of thought, as in Lucretius. It is not dramatic characterisation: how artificial are his Arcadian shepherds, how insipid his epic heroes! How feebly they compare with the characters of Homer or the great dramatists! It is not boldness of language, originality of concepts or metaphors: his borrowings are visible everywhere, from Ennius and Lucretius in Latin, from Homer and the Hellenistic poets in Greek. Sometimes they are word-for-word renderings of the Greek of Theocritus, Callimachus or Apollonius Rhodius. It is not a unifying philosophical or political credo, like the Epicureanism of Lucretius or the stoicism of Seneca and Lucan. Attempts to place him in a philosophical tradition—Pythagorean, Platonic, Epicurean—founder through his inconsistent eclecticism. We think we have caught his philosophy, placed it in a tradition, only to see it slide away like his eschatology, through the ivory gate. As for his politics—well, they are interesting, and he was lucky; he backed the right horse. Who could have predicted that Octavian, the bloodstained triumvir, would go down in history as the great emperor, the founder of the *Pax Romana*? But what of that? The final judgment of poets should never depend on their politics. Their function is to look beyond politics, to transcend them. So what is Virgil's secret power? The answer is, I suppose, that most indefinite an elusive of all qualities, pure poetry.

If a quality is indefinable, it is a waste of effort, mere pedantry, to seek to define it. I shall only say that there are certain poets who have the gift of expressing quite ordinary facts or sentiments or judgments with an elevation and yet simplicity and economy, and a musical beauty of language which gives them a haunting, etherial, almost sublime character.

Did I say 'have the gift'? Ought I rather to have said, 'have acquired the art'? Perhaps I ought. Whichever it is, the great primitive poets lack it, or have not cultivated it. There are few such lines in Homer: his greatness lies elsewhere. Perhaps it comes at a certain stage in the development of society, the sophistication of literary language.

Shakespeare has many such lines—but then Shakespeare, whom Ben Jonson saw as 'Nature's child' and Voltaire as a primitive poet, 'un barbare ivre', was a highly sophisticated artist who began as a euphuist, a mannerist of words. Milton, the most musical of our poets, who studied language with such exquisite care, and Keats, who strained after a similar perfection, a 'snailhorn perception of beauty', both have it; and it is this which, to me, is the great reward of reading Virgil. His eclogues may not breathe the authentic spirit of pastoral life. His Georgics may not give very practical advice to agriculturists. His pious Aeneas may not be a hero of the calibre of Achilles—the passionate, petulant, vindictive, eloquent, sentimental barbarian of the *Iliad*—and the faithful Achates is a poor, pale reflexion of Patroclus. We can see why the Greeks preferred to stick to their own poet. But where else in world literature can we find such economy, such flexibility, of language, such supreme artistry in its manipulation, such musical sensitivity, such sustained elevation—whether it is used to describe the sack of Troy, the emotions of Dido, the descent into Hades of Orpheus or of Aeneas, the rise and fall of empires, the economy of bees and ants, the operations of moles and toads, the depredations of weevils, beetles and harvest mice?

Virgil is an exact and exacting artist with words, a perfectionist aiming at a poetic ideal, unstated but deducible, of elevation, purity, simplicity, and charged with a message, also unstated, also deducible but clear: hatred of the convulsions of Italy, of civil war, desire for peace and order, for a return to the ancient virtue and stability of rural life, the foundation of Roman greatness, and, with it, a melancholy sense of the fragility of human greatness, human happiness. Like Milton, he was a very learned poet: learned in literature and philosophy, mythology and history; but unlike Milton he carried his learning lightly: he wrote slowly, polishing every line, eliminating all traces of pedantry. Even so, as we know, he was dissatisfied: he left many lines of the *Aeneid* unfinished, awaiting further attention, and on his death gave orders that the whole poem, as imperfect, be burned; which his executors, happily, did not obey.

To me, on my desert island, it is the delight of rediscovering those magical lines that will lift me out of insulated depression, and I try to envisage their effect when they were fresh, before they were staled by custom, imitation and the schools. For this reason I will have no commentary on my island. Commentaries, I believe—except that minimum

which is necessary in order to understand the text and the allusions—are the bane of literature, especially when they become, as they too often become in our system of education, a substitute for the literature on which they comment, and which is left unread. I think of all those dreary theses on great literature whose very language shows that the great literature has been read, if at all, in vain.

But how can we recapture that freshness, how think away all the incrustations—the repetitions, the imitations, the reinterpretations—of intervening time? It is not easy. All Latin poetry after Virgil was influenced by him, all before him was driven out by him. Cicero, like Virgil had a strong sense of history. A history of the Roman republic could be—has been[2]—compiled out of the incidental content of his speeches, letters and philosophical writings. Like Virgil, though with a different emphasis, he saw the present as the continuation of the past and treasured that continuity. He also treasured the old Roman poets who illustrated it, and he wrote somewhat disdainfully of the 'neoterics' like Catullus and Cinna who looked to Hellenistic models. Virgil was himself a neoteric in this sense, though he drew on the old Romans too, picking gold, as it was said, *e stercore Enniano*, from the dungheap of Ennius. But what was the result? All the old Roman poets were eclipsed and would be forgotten, left out of the syllabus, lost in the great gulf of the Lower Empire and the Dark Age. If a few fragments of them survive, it is because they had been lovingly cited by Cicero or quoted by the ancient editors of Virgil.

Meanwhile, Virgilian writing had become the norm. His vocabulary, his prosody, his metrical idiosyncrasies—those calculated variations of cadence, that typical caesura at the end of the fourth foot, those subtle elisions, those Greek metrical liberties with Greek proper names—for like Milton he loved to make music out of names—

> *Glauco et Panopeae et Inoo Melicertae . . .*
> *Atque Ephyre atque Opis et Asia Deiopeia . . .*
> *Atque Getae atque Hebrus et Actias Orithyia . . .*

or even with simple Greek words: hyacinthus, cyparissus, elephantus—all were taken over. He had broken the stiff protective barrier of the Latin language and a host of lesser poets walked easily through it behind him. So the Egyptian Greek Claudian could write verses the best

of which might have been written, on one of his dull days—in the third book of the *Aeneid* perhaps—by Virgil; the Latin poets of the Renaissance could write Virgilian eclogues, georgics, even epics, and call themselves the Pannonian or the Sarmatian or the Batavian Virgil; one of them, Mapheus Vegius, thought it no presumption to add a thirteenth book to the *Aeneid*, which the humanist printers would think it no presumption to include in their editions; and in the eighteenth century Jeremiah Markland could be ashamed of the real Virgil for not having reached his own high standard of Virgilian composition.

Let us forget all those pedants. There are, I believe, two ways of studying any great works of literature. One is historical. All literature, even the greatest, is conditioned by its historical context, its time, place and circumstances, the social, intellectual, even the political climate in which it was written. To understand its allusions, appreciate its nuances and subtleties, it is useful, perhaps necessary, to know that context. This historical sense is a comparatively late development. In the Middle Ages, even after the Renaissance, classical literature, like Biblical literature, was abstracted from its context, except in the most obvious sense, and, because it was so abstracted, was made easily applicable to other times and places. So the famous *Pollio*, the fourth eclogue, could be seen as an announcement of the birth of Christ and it would be suggested that the poet had read the prophecies of Isaiah. Even in the eighteenth century the *Georgics* could be seen as no more than a practical handbook in poetic form. Gibbon was innovating—or at lest he believed he was innovating— when he suggested that they should be seen historically, in the context of the civil wars of Rome, the need to settle the disbanded soldiery on the land, and therefore to idealise, instead of war, the peaceful life of the countryman, the farmer, the forester, the bee-keeper. Hence too the idyllic picture of the restoration of that life under Augustus, as illustrated by that old man from Corycia, in Asia Minor—a retired pirate, we are told, who had fought under Pompey—whom Virgil himself had seen cultivating his garden near Tarentum, under the high towers of Oebalia, among the golden cornfields watered by the river Galaesus in the same delightful spot—a sort of South Italian Bournemouth—in which Horace also thought of spending his retired old age.

Then, no less important, there is the intellectual context. In our own time Jerôme Carcopino has taken the fourth *Eclogue*, which has had such

a long run as Christian propaganda, and put it back into that context, into the neo-pythagorean world of Rome in the time of the Triumvirs: a world dominated by the great polymath, Cicero's friend, Varro, from whose work Virgil drew the substance of the *Georgics*, and P. Nigidius Figulus. Carcopino's revelation of this world—for I think it was he who first revealed it— coincided in time with the exploration of the comparable neo-platonic context of the late Italian Renaissance, so it can be seen as part of a general, and fruitful, re-direction of intellectual history. It has some enjoyable consequences too. It enabled the Catholic heretic Charles Guignebert to show how the Jewish heresy of Christianity, brought to Rome by St Paul, was there, through that same world, absorbed into Hellenism and transformed by it; a nice reversal of the old view of Virgil as the guide who led the way out of Hellenism into the Jewish heresy of Christianity.[3]

To see a great work of literature thus in its historical and intellectual context is to gain a fuller understanding and perhaps a deeper appreciation of its significance; but it does nothing to explain its greatness. That lies elsewhere, in the extent to which it transcends that context. A work that is totally explained by its context lives no longer than that context. It does not speak with a living voice to another age, another culture. Wherein, then, and how, does Virgil's work transcend the conditions which created and, to some extent, limited it?

I believe that this transcendence is always achieved by generalisation; perhaps we should say sublimation. The particular circumstances of Augustan Rome, on which Virgil and Horace inevitably commented, have disappeared, as have the particular circumstances of Elizabethan England, on which Shakespeare and Spenser commented. But these great poets made their comments in such general, even allegorical terms that their particular appreciation, being unspecified, has to be inferred. Sometimes the application is clear to the learned and can be demonstrated. Sometimes it is obscure or ambiguous and even the learned can only speculate. Scholars have pointed to numerous passages in Shakespeare that *could* refer to particular public events in his time or supposed episodes in his undocumented private life, but none of them can be *proved* to refer to them because, by their language, they are lifted above that particularity; indeed, although we can draw some conclusions about Shakespeare's personality from his works, we cannot use them to establish a single biographical fact. Virgil is like Shakespeare in this. He is

one of the most elusive of poets. In this he is very difference from his friend Horace—indeed a perfect example of Horace's ideal, *fallentis semita vitae*. Apart from that one reference to the old man gardening near Tarentum, I do not think there is a single explicit autobiographical reference in his works. Perhaps he is Tityrus in the first *Eclogue*, perhaps Menalcas in the ninth, just as Shakespeare may be Hamlet; but we cannot be sure; he does not say so.

Even his real views of Augustus and his golden age are not certain. Openly, of course, there are all those splendid puffs, those high-flown panegyrics in the *Georgics*: the portents when Julius Caesar was assassinated, the constellations adjusting themselves to accommodate Augustus in the heavens; and there are the historical prophecies in the *Aeneid*: prophecies announced by Jupiter in Heaven, by Anchises in Elysium, prophecies implicit in the imprecations of Dido, foreshadowed in the shield of Aeneas, and all pointing forwards, though the continuity of Roman history, to the empire on which the sun would never set:

> *His ego nec metas rerum nec tempora pono:*
> *Imperium sine fine dedi;*

and meanwhile, to emphasise that continuity, there are the images of all those shadowy kings and Roman heroes who would link and identify Troy with Rome, Aeneas with Augustus—like those foreshadowed Scottish kings who would link Banquo with James VI and I of Scotland and England,

However, when we look below the surface, when we listen to the private whisper within that magniloquent public voice, we are not quite so sure. Virgil's hatred of war, the undercurrent of melancholy, the tragic sense of life which is never far below the surface and informs his most memorable lines, makes us pause. In his beautifully concise and perceptive little book on Virgil, Jasper Griffin shows, very persuasively, how Virgil, by choosing to write a heroic poem not on Augustus but on Aeneas, looking forward to him, contrived at the same time to satisfy the duties and to avoid the perils of a poet laureate, and, while publicly declaring the required theme, to mingle with it a quiet private voice not indeed of criticism or dissent but of ambiguity and unease: a recurrent reminder of the heavy cost of imperialism, the coarsening of spirit which it entails, the sacrifice of the Muses to the noise of war, the heavy burden

of greatness and rule. After all, if there is any explicit statement by Virgil of his own scale of values, surely it must be that marvellous closing passage of the second *Georgic*, where, for the only time, he speaks not through imaginary shepherds, or prophets, or gods, but in his own person, with his own voice:

> *me vero primum dulces ante omnia Musae,*
> *quarum sacra fero, ingenti percussus amore,*
> *accipiant caelique vias et sidera monstrent . . .*

and then, if full knowledge of the natural world is inaccessible to dull human senses,

> *rura mihi et rigui placeant in vallibus amnes:*
> *flumina amem silvasque inglorius.*

Happy is he who can discern the secrets of Nature, but happy also he who knows the divinities of the countryside, Pan and old Silvanus and the sister nymphs. Such a man is not troubled by affairs of state. The strife of the parties, the threat of war do not concern him:

> *non res Romanae perituraque regna,*

not the state of Rome, nor empires doomed to perish. That is surely a real *credo*; and it is very different from the political triumphalism of the great set pieces of panegyric.

Beyond all the fascinating problems of scholarship—problems of historical context and application, or personal character and biography—the ultimate pleasure of reading Virgil is still, I believe, his style, that marvellous elevation and flexibility and music of language even when the context of it is nothing extraordinary. But this, to us now, poses a problem. At a time when knowledge of the Latin language is dying out, how is that pleasure to be communicated so that others can enjoy it? A later performer on that radio programme said that she would take the poems of Virgil with her to the island—but in translation. But can the quality of Virgil be conveyed in translation? Pure poetry is, by definition, that which cannot be translated, and the specific character of the Latin language—so economical, so exact, so lapidary—compounds the difficulty.

Many have attempted to render Virgil into English, but who among them has caught his real voice? Certainly not the man who took most trouble about it, the Anglo-Irish convert to Catholicism, Richard Stanyhurst. He sought to capture the rhythm of Virgil by following the rules laid down by that arch-pedant, who was also Spenser's mentor, Gabriel Harvey, and by keeping to Virgil's metre; but our language has never been broken to hexameters, and the result was not a success. Here is Dido's imprecation, in Virgil, as Aeneas sails away from Carthage:

> *terque quaterque manu pectus percussa decorum,*
> *flaventesque abscissa comas, pro Iuppiter, ibit*
> *hic, ait, et nostris illuserit advena regnis.*

Who would recognise this in Stanyhurst's version:

> Thrise, nay she foure seasons on fayre brest mightely bouncing,
> And her heare owt rowting yellow: 'God Juppiter, ogh Lord,
> Quod she, shal hee scape thus? shal a stranger geve me the slampam?

Stanyhurst translated the first four books of the *Aeneid* in this manner. He was very pleased with the result. He thought that he had succeeded in accurately conveying both 'the peerless style' and 'matchless stuff' of the poet and 'beautifying our English language with heroical verses'. Gabriel Harvey was also delighted with it: he hailed Stanyhurst as a worthy disciple. Alas, they were in a minority: a minority of two. The rest of the literary world, then and since, has seen his work as, at best, 'an incomparable oddity'.

Perhaps only another poet—a poet in his own right, a poet who is also a delicate craftsman, 'a nice critic in his mother tongue'—can translate Virgil. This was the expressed view of John Dryden, who was himself not only (in my opinion) one of the greatest of our poets but also one of the most careful and sensitive of critics. Dryden loved Virgil as one 'whose beauties I have been endeavouring all my life to imitate', and he was indignant to see him so often 'abused . . . by a botching interpreter'. He also knew the hazards of life as a poet laureate and was a master of politic ambiguity. In 1685, when he was high in favour at court and looked forward to writing the *Aeneid* of the Stuart dynasty, he published some samples of translation, and in his preface to them he expressed his view of Virgil:

> 'a succinct and grave majestic writer, one who weighed not only every thought but every word and syllable . . . his verse is everywhere sounding the very thing in your ears whose sense it bears; yet the numbers are perpetually varied to increase the delight of the reader, so that the same sounds are never repeated twice together'

—unlike Ovid and Claudian who, though very different from each other, 'have each of them but one sort of music in their voices'.[4] Has anyone defined the style of Virgil better than this?

After the Revolution of 1688, when the Stuart dynasty had fallen, and Dryden with it, he took to systematic translation as a means of subsistence, and in 1694 he undertook to translate the whole works of Virgil. By that time he was particularly sensitive to the subtleties and ambiguities of Virgil, whom he now saw, through the veil of courtly encomium and flattering allegory, as a closet republican; for how else could one interpret that mysterious and gratuitous line which Virgil inserts into the shield of Aeneas, with its prefiguration of the glory of Rome, and the saints of its history, set apart in Elysium, receiving their laws from the republican martyr Cato:

secretosque pios, his dantem iura Catonem? [5]

What, I wonder, did Augustus make of that line? But it has been pointed out to me that the only line of the *Aeneid* known to have been quoted by Augustus comes very near the beginning of Book I; so perhaps the busy emperor did not persevere as far as Book VIII.[6]

To read Dryden's translation, apart from the sheer pleasure of the poetry, is to thread a fascinating double labyrinth in which the politic ambiguities of the poet are compounded by those of his translator. For the translations were dedicated, by an unrepentant Jacobite, to crypto-Jacobite grandees; his Aeneas, who had been Augustus, now wore a contemporary look. Was he the exiled King James to whom Dryden hoped to dedicate his *Aeneid* on the triumphant return of the exile? Many sly renderings insinuate the suggestion. But such ingenuity could be exercised by others too; for did not Aeneas come to Italy from abroad, as an invader, and secure the crown of Latium, as son-in-law of the legitimate king, displacing the established heir? Dryden's whig publisher, whose proposal that the work be dedicated to William III had been

turned down by the poet, still made the inconvenient point by re-touching the old plates from a previous translation so as to give Aeneas the unmistakeable hooked nose of his hero. To which Dryden could only retort that at least Aeneas waited till his father-in-law was dead before taking his throne.[7]

But these are incidental subtleties. Let us return to the prime quality of Virgil: his pure poetry. To Dryden, himself rusticated from the infectious air of the court, 'the best poem of the best poet' was the *Georgics*. As a sample, I turn up 'those inimitable lines' (as Addison called them) in which Virgil envisages the burial of the bloody civil wars of Rome by a returned Saturnian, or Augustan, reign of pastoral peace:

> *Agricola incurvo terram molitus aratro*
> *exesa inveniet scabra robigine pila*
> *et gravibus rastris galeas pulsabit inanes*
> *grandiaque effossis mirabitur ossa sepulcris.*

How does Dryden render this?

> Then, after length of time, the lab'ring swains
> Who turn the turf of those unhappy plains
> Shall rusty piles from the plough'd furrows take
> And over empty helmets pass the rake,
> Amaz'd at antique titles on the stones
> And mighty reliques of gigantick bones.

Not Virgil perhaps, but Augustan, and poetry.

'All that I can promise myself,' Dryden wrote of his first translations from Virgil, 'is only that I have done better than Ogleby' (his English predecessor) 'and perhaps as well as Caro' (the Italian translator of the *Aeneid*); 'so that methinks I come like a malefactor, to make a speech upon the gallows, and to warn all other poets, by my sad example, from the sacrilege of translating Virgil.'[8]

If that is the final judgment of the best translator of Virgil, the lesson, for lovers of literature, is clear. We must not allow the study and knowledge of the Latin language to die.

Oxford **LORD DACRE OF GLANTON**

NOTES

1. Gibbon, *Miscellaneous Works* (1796) II, 714.
2. In that very rare work, William Bellenden's *De Tribus Luminibus Romanorum* (Paris, 1633).
3. Ch. Guignebert, *Le Christ* (Paris, 1943) 181–7.
4. Dryden, *Sylvae, or the Second Part of Poetical Miscellanies* (1685), Preface.
5. Dryden, *Dedication of the Aeneis* (1697).
6. But perhaps Virgil reckoned on the tolerant spirit of his master. Mr Robert Parker has directed me to an episode cited by Macrobius (II.4.18), which shows Augustus defending Cato against his detractors: *quisque praesentem statum civitatis commutari non volet, et civis et vir bonus est.*
7. On this subject, see James Anderson Winn, *John Dryden and his World* (New Haven, 1987) 485–9.
8. *Sylvae*, Preface.