

On ‘Making it Strange’

I offer here a few comments on Prof. Morton Braund’s Presidential Address, entitled ‘Making Virgil Strange’ (*Proceedings*, 2004, 135-46). I shall leave aside the ‘many Virgils’ which have existed over the centuries, except to make two points which are so obvious that they are sometimes overlooked. First, apart from a couple of very old questions (in particular the *Ille ego* lines and the Helen episode) the text of the *Aeneid* has, for well known reasons, remained relatively constant. The same is wholly true of the narrative. Ask anyone today what takes place in the epic – what the story is about – and the answer will be what it has always been since Varius and Tucca’s text first appeared. Different interpretations, whether religious, moral, or political, are on a secondary level and can (it seems to me) be exaggerated. But that is another matter. Prof. Morton Braund concentrates on the problems of translation, and I am concerned only with her thesis that a good translation will make the *Aeneid* ‘strange’.

Take the question of form. In the last hundred years the most familiar form has been prose, whether in the Globe, Oxford, Loeb or Penguin edition. That is because the translator, while avoiding crude literalism, has aimed primarily to help students with the Latin. If he abandons prose and decides on a regular verse-form, he will often have to forfeit that kind of authenticity, though if he is an accomplished versifier he will gain another. What form, then, should he choose? Prof. Morton Braund prints six samples, ranging from Douglas to Fitzgerald; several others can be studied in Ken Gransden’s *Virgil in English* (Penguin, 1996). Which of these, one wonders, should be rejected because of its familiarity? If blank verse (Milton’s, as copied by Addison) and the rhyming couplet (as used by Cowley and Dryden) are ruled out, it can hardly be because of their familiarity, though it would be nice to think so. The reason why they have been avoided in the last fifty years is surely that they are out of date. Recent versions have adopted some dactylic rhythms (especially Humphries, but also to some extent Day Lewis and Heaney). A much larger dactylic element, as employed by Bridges, showed that a high proportion of dactyls in English was too monotonous. In Latin, of course, the dactylic hexameter was not monotonous, because of the variety imparted by spondees and the ictus/accent tension. That, to a certain degree, was a refinement of Virgil’s; but the metre as such had been familiar to the Romans since the time of Ennius (to say nothing of Homer). Its long history enhanced its authority. It remains to be seen whether in the twenty-first century some translators will revert to the unrhymed iambic pentameter or settle for the various forms which have become familiar in the past fifty years. It is quite a dilemma.

As for diction, it is true that some ancient critics found Virgil's somewhat affected (see Conington, vol.1, xxix-xxxv), but he had many defenders, including Horace; and his admirers eventually won an overwhelming victory. So one infers that his innovations in the use of Latin actually enhanced his charm. Naturally, translators cannot hope to match these effects, but they can try not to falsify the meaning. This problem occurs in the first word of the poem. Servius says that *per 'arma' bellum significat* and rejects the idea of weapons. The writers of the four prose versions mentioned above were no doubt perfectly aware of this, but they all wrote 'Arms', because the poet had chosen *arma*, not *bella*, and because they expected their readers to recognize the metonymy. If this expectation is no longer realistic, go for 'War' (a bigger word than Prof. Morton Braund's 'combat'), but if we do, we are taking a step away from fidelity. And we are doing so, not on the grounds that 'Arms' is familiar, but that it has become misleading. (Incidentally, *OED* glosses 'arms' in II 6 by 'war', citing passages from Chaucer, Marlowe, and Dryden; but in II 8 it gives 'Deeds or feats of arms' and cites Chaucer, *House of Fame* 144, 'The armes and also the man', and Dryden 'Arms, and the man I sing.' This looks like a mistake, though *arma* in some passages does seem to have that sense, e.g. *Aen.* 4.403 *pietate insignis et armis* and Ovid *Fast.* 1.260 *Oebalii rettulit arma Tati*.)

Some years ago, when preparing a translation of Juvenal, I came across a version which was deliberately strange (for the notion is not exactly new). From *Sat.* 16 on the army I quote the following, largely dactylic, lines:

Who could number the prizes, Gallius, of successful
Soldiering? If one is entering prosperous barracks
Under their lucky star me let the gate receive,
Timid recruit. For one hour's kindly fate works more
Than if from Venus a letter should commend us to Mars,
She (*sic*) and his mother who delights in Samos sand.

Such a passage demonstrates that when a translator tries too hard to be strange, he tends to become unreadable. Prof. Morton Braund's Juvenal is very different. Written in good, straightforward prose, it sticks close to the Latin and supplies a lot of scholarly information. But that volume was written within the conventions of the Loeb series. So we turn to her specimen of *Aeneid* 1.1-11 to clarify what she means by 'strange' (p. 146). What we find is something in rather stiff, but certainly not strange or unusual, English. As for the form, on reading the first line: "I sing of combat and the hero who was first to come..." we may infer that, like Phaer, she has chosen the old fourteener as her medium. But that effect seems to have been inadvertent; for the following lines have no regular rhythm (as far as I could discover). So perhaps the piece has to be read as free verse. And whatever one may say about that self-contradictory phenomenon, it is certainly very familiar.

As the reader has probably guessed, these comments come from one who is a generation older than Prof. Morton Braund. So they are not intended to sound impertinent. If they contain any message, it is, perhaps, that if she intends to translate the *Aeneid*, she should do what she does best, and ignore those siren voices which urge her to aim at strangeness. Otherwise, instead of making a valuable addition to the company of translations, she may find that the result is just another curiosity.

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