

It's Better in Latin

Louis Amis

August 2008

Translating the Latin of Virgil's *Aeneid* into English verse requires first a Trojan war of interpretation, and then an odyssey of re-encryption. The density of meaning in the poem is prodigious: ambiguities, allusions and many-faced images are built into the original with the free word order and syllabic economy of an inflected language that can't be recreated in English. Doing justice to what Tennyson called the "stateliest measure ever moulded by the lips of man" - the rhythm of the Virgilian hexameters - is another challenge. These are lines of six feet and between 13 and 17 syllables, in a metre based on syllable length, which produces, in interplay with the stress accents, effects that are alien to English.

All of this clearly didn't seem like enough of a challenge for Sarah Ruden, who - in flagrant contravention of clause c) of Vladimir Nabokov's rules for translators - has this year become the first woman to translate the most macho of epic poems. She has rejected the common and commonsense approach of using a long line that evokes the hexameter and, more importantly, provides space for all the content that comes expanding out of the Latin. Her choice of iambic pentameter is not unusual in itself, but coupled with her commitment to line-for-line translation, it results in extreme space restriction. It is an ambitious choice: many translations limit neither the syllables nor the number of lines.

Fortune favours the brave, apparently. All translations leave out elements of the original and add some of their own; Ruden's has its share of missing pieces but is refreshingly free of additions. She simply has no room in her short, over-subscribed lines for the frills - an extra adjective here, an adverb there - that other translators add, and the line-for-line discipline that keeps the space tight is itself an act of loyalty to the pace of the original. The translation has a lean, unadulterated feel to it: Ruden's poetic energy has gone into finding words that work overtime rather than her own flourishes. The pentameter, as well as making for an easier, more natural read than a longer line, conveys the regularity of the Latin verse, an effect that freer translations (like that of Robert Fagles) forfeit.

The higher impact of Ruden's fewer, simpler (and often more apt) words is thrilling - especially in the battle scenes. She captures both the explosiveness and the pathos in the great battle in Book 10:

The spearhead, striking, shaking, pounded through

The shield - all of the bronze and iron sheets,

All of the bull-hide layers wrapping it -

Into the breastplate, into that strong chest.

Out of the wound he tore the heated shaft,

But with it came his lifeblood and his soul.

The concise style also preserves the tension that can peter out with a longer line. These lines from Book 2 describe night falling for the last time on the city of Troy:

The heavens swung round, night leaped from the ocean

To wrap the earth and sky - and Greek deceit -

In its great shadow.

They compare favourably with Fagles's slightly over-ornamented attempt to mimic the sounds and rhythm of the Latin:

... But all the while

the skies keep wheeling on and night comes sweeping in

from the Ocean Stream, in its mammoth shadow swallowing up

the earth, and the Pole Star, and the treachery of the Greeks.

The drawback to this frequently effective style is that some lines lose their weight because they need the emphasis that only extra words can provide. Consider the last line of the poem's opening section, an emotive and programmatic line, the last before we join the action of the plot. Cecil Day-Lewis has it as "So massive a task it was to found the Roman race." Robert Fitzgerald adds an adjective with "so hard and huge/ A task it was to found the Roman people." These translations are faithful to the structure of the Latin sentence; Sarah Ruden's "It cost so much to found the Roman nation" is not; and nor is it faithful to the tone of an important line. Another example comes in Book 2 when Aeneas is tearfully recounting the story of the Trojan horse: "We poor fools, whose very last day it was, festooned/ The shrines of the gods with holiday foliage all over the city" (Day-Lewis), is again closer to both the syntax and the tone than Ruden's abrupt "We wretches on our last day garlanded/ The temples of the gods all through the city."

The register of the language is a very important question for translators hoping to render "a modern *Aeneid*" (there have been several in the 21st century already). Ruden's style is certainly disposed towards keeping with the general trend of "toning down the magniloquence" (as in "It cost so much ..."), but she manages to steer pretty clear of a related trend, the use of modern colloquialisms. This phenomenon, which can so thoroughly ruin a line, seems to tempt translators most in passages of direct speech, but can appear anywhere. The *Aeneid* should be sober, but it shouldn't ever be mundane.

The tone of Ruden's Book 6 is subtly undermined by a sprinkling of inappropriate words: the Sibyl, Aeneas's guide through Hades, accuses him of "gawking" and tells him not to "dawdle"; the moon is "stingy", phantom monsters are "flimsy forms"; Aeneas crosses the Styx to arrive on the "muck" of the other bank. None of these are terrible on their own, but cumulatively they create an air of frivolity that detracts from the melancholy of the underworld.

The tone should be sacred because of the meetings that Aeneas has, the series of conversations that together contain everything a human being might want to say to, or need to be told by, the ghosts of his dead. But Aeneas's words to Dido, "You stabbed yourself", are too tactless even for him. She does not respond to him and retreats to her former husband Sychaeus, who "felt for her sorrow". The Greek soldiers who, famously, can give no body to their battle cries on seeing Aeneas are "squeaking" (compare Fagles' "thin wisp of a cry"). Deiphobus, Aeneas's fallen comrade, complains of Helen, who betrayed him to "her old flame" Menelaus, hoping to "kill the stink" of her -infidelity. Some of these undignified words and phrases are consistent with certain arguable interpretations of the text - the squalor of Hades, the brutish bitterness of Deiphobus, for instance - but they owe their presence, ultimately, to Ruden's self-inflicted space constraints.

These slips are not the result of an en-demic problem. Elsewhere she renders direct speech brilliantly - again, the battlefield is where the short and sharp style is most fitting. At the end of Book 10, in one of the poem's greatest scenes, a wounded hero returns to the fray to avenge his son. These are his words to his horse, just before:

"...Or if our strength cannot accomplish it,

You'll fall with me. Brave thing, I don't believe

You'd take your orders from a Trojan master."

Another translator operating more freely might overdo the emotion here, but all of the pathos rests in the simplicity of "I don't believe" at the end of the line (a positioning preserved from the Latin), and Mezentius's transference of his own feelings on to the horse. Here he lies dying, and speaks to Aeneas:

Gasping the sky in, gazing at the air.

"Cruel enemy - why these sneering threats of death?

Killing's no crime - I came here knowing that.

My Lausus made no pact with you to save me."

Great last words, but the whole section, the deaths of both Mezentius and Lausus ("... this should solace

your pathetic death:/ It came from great Aeneas") and the direct speech in particular, is a triumph.

Some lines of the *Aeneid* are so sublime or so mysterious that the poet-translator just has to "have a go"; in these cases, Ruden surely wished for a little more room to breathe. "Even here is praise for valour,/ And tears of pity for a mortal world" is a decent rendering of a famous phrase, but it lacks something. With his extra freedom, Fagles can give us "even here, the world is a world of tears/ and the burdens of mortality touch the heart." If nothing else, Fagles has drawn special attention to an exceptional line. When Aeneas meets the ghost of his father in the underworld, he tries to hug him three times:

Three times the form slid from his useless hands,

Like weightless wind or dreams that fly away.

Ruden's version is good - "useless hands" is an original and sensitive economy - but it is doubtful whether any translation could do full justice to this heartbreaking moment. Here is H Rushton Fairclough's prose:

Thrice the form, vainly clasped, fled from his hands, even as light winds, and most like a winged dream.

One feature of the *Aeneid* that certainly defies translation is its imagery - "for," as the great Bernard Knox wrote, "in the complexity of a great poet's imagery we must recognise a mystery which lies beyond the frontiers of conscious art". Knox found, and in his classic essay, *The Serpent and the Flame*, carefully pointed out, the image of a serpent that dominates Book 2 as a kind of obsessive metaphor, appearing again and again, explicitly and implicitly. What he realised but could only begin to explore was that his serpent - the presence of which is undeniable - was just a local ex-ample of a broad process. Repeated images, -echoes and recurring variations on a visual theme act as veins of meaning that course and intertwine throughout the fabric of the poem, and create their own complex narratives.

How well does Ruden's, or any other translation, capture this? The answer is: inadequately. The *Aeneid* is ultimately too dense and too important a poem to be read only in English, but with the tribe of Latin poetry readers hurtling ever closer to extinction, we may have to settle for the next best thing - lots of different translations. They are all hit and miss, but between them they give us a great deal of what the *Aeneid* has to offer. Ruden's is an outstanding addition to the fold.

Copyright © Social Affairs Unit Magazines Limited 2008

Source URL: <http://www.standpointmag.co.uk/its-better-in-latin-august>