"Never forget: Virgil was an Italian." So a colleague told me years ago (admittedly he was Italian) and the implications of his pronouncement were quite clear: Virgil loved his earth dearly, he relished wine and conviviality, and he urged reverence for the gods—of the sky, the middle world and the Underworld. His epic voice rises to the occasion of Italian empire, of courtly formality and splendor, while he laments the inevitability of war, the mystery of divine opposition, the loss of family and friends through age, sickness or battle, and the loss of a lover through Fate—that strange embodiment, Fatum, of divine pronouncements, effata. The dramatically and at times operatically Italian world of The Aeneid unfolds its sea-storms, volcanic rumblings, passionate struggles with the self and with la forza del destino, the full gamut of rage, grief and ecstatic wonder. My colleague’s reminder often kept me in touch with Virgilian essentials.

Others have reminded us of course that The Aeneid is also the epic of Augustan Rome, with all the ancient honor and modern doubt associated therewith, that Virgil is a worthy imitator of Homer, and that the poem is highly representative of a golden age in Latin literature, composed as it was from 30 to 20 B.C. True, Virgil was writing at the end of a bitter civil war in Italy and he hoped to re-establish pietas, translatable (depending on the context) as “reverence” towards the gods, “duty” towards one’s family, and “conscientiousness” towards one’s friends. Aeneas exemplifies pietas best. He is a caring leader of exiled Trojans, he tries to stay (sometimes against his instincts) close to the gods, he loves his father Anchises, his wife Creusa, and his son Ascanius, or Iulus. Although he’s been called “pious” (when pius is translated
simplistically), although Virgil’s *pater Aeneas* has been rendered simply “father Aeneas” (“the hero is a priest,” one wag has said). Virgil’s central character is a man struggling among human and superhuman forces, sorrowing from one lost home or landfall to another, and determined to keep himself and his people together. Fatherhood is not an evil, nor is reverence an old-fashioned virtue, in this poem.

To some it has all seemed too well arranged. Jupiter, the father of gods, tells Venus in Book I (she is the goddess of love and mother of Aeneas) where things are going generally, giving much of the plot away. If Virgil is the father of Jupiter, in a sense, is the poem simply playing into the hands of the poet? And perhaps into the hands of Augustus, Emperor of Rome in Virgil’s day. Wasn’t he somewhat like Aeneas, having struggled and often killed to achieve his ends, a man who would welcome an epic celebrating the return of ancient order and values in himself?

Yes and no. Virgil’s is a double perspective: gods and demi-gods generally know the direction of events; Aeneas and his people are much less sure. How often they blunder, in fact, misinterpreting signs and speeches from heaven! Aeneas, for example, told to pack up and leave a burning Troy in Book II, repeatedly throws himself into battle instead, sometimes moved by military duty, sometimes by wild rage and despair. For many others—Anchises, Creusa, Dido and Turnus—the world of *The Aeneid* is not neatly arranged at all. Distinguishing between true and false love, between helpful and spiteful Gods, between right and wrong leaders—frequently all that is impossible for them. Dido involves herself with occult or would-be religion in Book IV, half suspecting her error, hardly able to correct it. As for Turnus, Aeneas’ principal opponent in the war in Italy, his best initial instincts in Book VII are snuffed quickly. When he dismisses alarms about the newly arrived Trojans he is set upon by a sudden madness, provoked by Allecto, an Underworld power. Off he rushes into battle, commanding thousands to join him. Thus, though the overriding thrust of *The Aeneid* could be called imperialistic (Aeneas and the Trojan-Latin bloodline do triumph), *inside* the poem is darkness and tension. So much is lost and mourned on the way. The final killing of Turnus himself has struck many as extreme, especially in its matter-of-factness. Virgil’s Roman friends must have wondered: where is the triumphal march, why isn’t the new wealth described in detail, and what about the all-important marriage of Aeneas and Lavinia, King Latinus’ daughter? Virgil does not conclude or perorate. *The Aeneid* painfully stops.
The human drama of the poem matters enormously. Virgil was influenced by Homer—Books VII through XII are a kind of *Iliad*, I through VI an *Odyssey*—but he was also influenced by Greek tragedy, especially by Euripides. The passion of Dido in Book IV has its counterpart in the tragedy of Medea; the Odysseus-Circe story is also there but less insistent. Indeed Virgil is so taken by Dido (in Books I and VI as well as IV) that he allows the emotional center of the poem to drift somewhat away from Aeneas. Thousands of readers from Augustine to the present have empathized profoundly with the Carthaginian queen.

The drama of Book VI is also most compelling. The Underworld through which Aeneas is guided by the Sibyl is vast, complex and crowded with emotion, with figures like the brutally maimed Deiphobus, who recalls the treachery and sadism of the beautiful Helen on Troy's final night; Dido appears again, grimly silent towards Aeneas and accompanied only by Sychaeus, her husband in a former life at Tyre; and of course Anchises, the proud and garrulous father of Aeneas, overjoyed at reunion with his son—or is it reunion? Three times the son tries to embrace the shadow-like father, and fails. The epic introduction of future Romans by Anchises is not without dramatic interruptions of its own: it pauses, it actually stumbles over human error and setback—the bitter fight between Caesar and Pompey, for example, or the funeral of the boy Marcellus—a loss Anchises begs Aeneas not to inquire about. If Virgil is determined to point up Roman virtues, the power to govern as well as the obligation towards the father—and towards the mother as well, as we see in the mysterious figure of Cybele, mother of all the gods—Virgil is just as determined to hear out, to linger over and care about troubled humans. The Sibyl, taught by a Goddess, urges us to persist along the destined road but Aeneas, taught by the exigencies of the human condition, like us, at times must stop. He'll speak for instance with Palinurus: what happened after the helmsman fell overboard? Why is he here, on the wrong side of the Styx River? Virgil's epic design carries us forward; his human drama must give us pause.

How can an English translation capture such poetry, this music so highly praised by Tennyson, a Latin style which William Arrowsmith has called mandarin? Virgil's language itself may provide clues. He works with a variety of diction (as the excellent new Oxford commentaries point up), even including phrases from Roman comedy; he builds a variety of sentences, from the
most elaborately architectonic to the simplest quip (the latter usually in dialogue); and he orchestrates most carefully, often clustering musical variations, over the course of five or ten lines, around a single vowel-and-consonant theme. Though he has daunted the most ingenious of translators, his epic style is clear in (1) its momentum, an often relentless forward movement that echoes the necessity of Aeneas' going on despite his human desire to linger and delay, and (2) its melancholy, the lacrimae rerum, the tears shed over human affairs; for mentem mortalia tangunt,—the sorrows of others do touch the human heart. The momentum is often achieved by Virgil's letting the long dactylic hexameter line run on (unlike the line of predecessors like Lucretius), hurrying story and rhythm along onto the next verse. The second quality he often achieves by crowding consonants and vowels together, building assonance and alliteration, all tending to slow the rhythm, to stress the pathos.

One must also assume a certain strength and resilience in one's own tongue. The resources of modern English do come up to a translation of Virgil—though perhaps not the resources of any modern English poetry—not the deceptively relaxed and colloquial idiom of Robert Frost, for example, or the Pound of many Cantos, or the Ginsberg of Howl. The style of Yeats in the 1920s, of Robert Lowell in the 1940s, and of Derek Walcott in the 1970s—all might have produced a fine English Aeneid. My version has taken inspiration and courage from their work and from others, since no one can translate Virgil without great help. I gladly credit Donald Hall, who has provided dependably trenchant advice about many a limping, banal phrase. Richard Wilbur led me back more than once to the right, highly disciplined track. The late William Arrowsmith's encouragement—comprehensive and detailed—has been invaluable. I owe many thanks to the late John Workman at Brown, to Ronald Knox, to many others near and far, including colleagues at Providence like Rodney Delasanta, Charles Duffy, Patrick Reid and Terrie Curran. Forrest Gander, who as poet and publisher of poets is well aware of the resources of modern English, gave his close attention to the entire work. It is Robert Bly who receives the book's dedication: his support has been the sine qua non.

I strived for an English Aeneid as varied and intense, as momentous and dramatic, as the Latin original, and of course I did not succeed. But what a hearty and heady experience to have strived! Working with a flexible five-beat line for this translation (some have six beats), usually with a dactyl-trochee combination
at the line's end (as in Virgil), I often ran one line onto the next and paused after the first foot—another frequent tactic of the original. Without going into all the technicalities, I can claim to have followed Virgil line for line (as C. Day Lewis did in his very able "reading" version): students and teachers of the original will find their place here very readily. I also tried to vary the syntax considerably, as Virgil does, to pay close attention to his occasionally novel diction (well attested to by Austin and others in the Oxford commentaries), and to keep the idiom rather elevated as in the Latin—this was especially hard—without sounding pompous or stiff in the English. Perhaps presumptuously, I even tried to imitate his orchestration often, working with harsh vowels and hard consonants for example when he describes a battle scene. I came to discover and appreciate a hundred intricacies of Virgilian craftsmanship—a great benefit for the poet-translator. Hard and pleasureable as all that was, trying to create a perfect counterpart in English turned out to be far harder—impossible, truly. So I strived for the closest possible equivalent. If the results lead a few ardent souls to take on the Latin itself for the first time, I will be most content.

No doubt the translation nods at times—no doubt the original does—even as Homer nods. But how often Virgil amazes the reader with imaginative energy and passion! I've worked especially hard on those passages. The most striking epic similes, for example, I hope will read well in this translation. Elsewhere it's a little thing, a striking phrase which for a variety of reasons has lost its impact in English translations over the years. When Achaemenides, for example, a lost member of Ulysses' crew, begs Aeneas for help in Book III, he calls the gods to witness, the stars, and hoc caeli spirabile lumen. Three of the words are no problem—"this light of the sky"; spirabile is another matter. Although the Latin verb spirare means "to breathe," giving us the English respiration and inspire, some translators render the passage "the air we breathe" (lumen, or "light" is lost), "by the breath and light of life" (there's no "life" in the original, and caeli or "sky" is lost) and "the vital air" (losing both the "sky" and the "breathing"). Two others retain some of the metaphorical power but warily, diluting the adjective or introducing a relative clause: "by the light of heaven that we breathe" and "this lightsome air we breathe." In the present translation, "this breathable daylight" retains Virgil's metaphor, strange-sounding though it be, and also retains something of the Latin line's rhythm. Clarity is a high priority in translation but I think one has to guard against making
too much sense of this Latin, especially in elusive and highly imaginative moments.

In fact artists as well as poets following Virgil have responded to his most dramatic and imaginative exertions in extraordinary ways. The intense and ambiguous moment in the cave when Aeneas and Dido come together, the ferocious attack of the sea-serpents upon Laöcoön and his sons, the sudden burning of Lavinia’s hair, the dark struggle for a doomed Troy, the crossing of the Styx River, the transformation of Aeneas’ ships into sea- nymphs: these and many other moments have haunted the imaginations of painters, sculptors and translators for centuries. The present writer and illustrator are no exceptions—the hardest thing in the long run, in fact, may be resisting the tendency to linger over and labor—even indefinitely!—the great scenes. Virgil’s power of fantasy may be so pronounced (not only in the Underworld of Book VI) and his capacity for dramatic confrontation so profound (not only in the bitter romance of Book IV) that one closes The Aeneid sensing, momentarily, that reality is behind one, not ahead. The grim vividness and variety of those battle scenes in the later books, the verve and color of the games in Sicily, the warmth and conviction of characters everywhere, down to the last no-nonsense appeal of Turnus—and the no-nonsense reply of Aeneas—all are images that cry out for new expression, in translation and in art, from generation to generation.

The last word, I suppose, should be fidelity. If a translation is not to be a free adaptation, what Robert Lowell called “imitation,” neither should it turn out to be mere transliteration. Because the latter is difficult in prose and quite impossible in poetry, some have despaired of translation altogether, arguing that no attempt will be “faithful” to the original. Too much distortion of sound and sense will take place.

So goes the theoretical opposition. To get from day to day, however, I must be practical. I tried working with the idea that everything really significant in the Latin could take significant form in English; that a final version could be adequately if not absolutely faithful; that it could be readable, too, and enjoyably so. Did I blandly suppose that these two languages could live and work together? Not exactly; it all took a good deal of mediation. Thus a Latin verb might better appear as an English noun here, a specific noun might appear as a general one, and a complex phrase or clause might rearrange itself somewhat in the English—as the famous first line,
TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

Arma virumque cano Troiae qui primus ab oris,

might read,

My song is of war, and the first man from a Trojan coast . . .

Since my idiom derives from writers like Yeats and Wilbur, Lowell and Walcott, some readers may find the style of the translation rather high and solitary, stern at times. But Virgil's vision and manner are both generally somber and serious. I attempted no novel-writing, no leveling of The Aeneid into pop story and easy message. Every reader has to rise to the occasion of this magnificent epic as he or she can. The rewards, of course, have been known to last a lifetime.

Edward McCRorie
Providence, Rhode Island
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