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Wars and a Man

By BRAD LEITHAUSER

There's a moment in Virgil's "Aeneid" when the Trojan forces are massed like "a cloudburst wiping out the sun, sweeping over the seas toward land." It's an image that evokes another army, likewise intimidating, although this one's composed chiefly of sedentary men, white-haired and bespectacled. Their numbers, too, are unreckonable — those squadrons of scholars who have, over the centuries, translated the "Aeneid."

THE AENEID

By Virgil. Translated by Robert Fagles.

486 pp. Viking. \$40.

Has any book been recast into English more times than this tale of Aeneas' wanderings and the eventual establishment of the Roman Empire? Probably not, given both the poem's venerability and the relative accessibility of Latin. When you further consider all the partial or complete versions in private manuscript — often the work of old classics teachers, shared with their students — we indeed confront something that looms over us like a cloudburst.

Robert Fagles, the poem's newest translator, comes to the fray well armed. An emeritus professor of comparative literature at Princeton, he has already translated, with great success, Homer's "Iliad" and "Odyssey." And his publisher for the "Aeneid," Viking, has accoutered him handsomely, with a clear map, a useful pronunciation glossary, and a harmonious blend of layout and type font and binding.

For all its translations, the "Aeneid" erects sizable obstacles for anybody hoping to render it into satisfying English. Perhaps the most formidable of these is the tale's diminishing narrative drive. Most of what lingers in the reader's memory — the fall of Troy, Dido's passion and ultimate suicide, Aeneas' journey to the Underworld — unfolds in the first six of the poem's 12 books; the epic's second half largely documents a successful military campaign against the Rutulians in Italy.

I've conducted a little poll over the years, asking various fellow English professors to name Aeneas' chief adversary — the warrior Turnus, leader of the Rutulians, who stands in relation to Aeneas as Hector does to Achilles. They frequently can't, which I find reassuring. For who can fault them, given that Turnus is, as epic antagonists go, so blandly magnificent? (Or is it magnificently bland?) He's stalwart, handsome and, when left to his own devices, peaceable. If he's occasionally possessed by blood-lust, this is mostly the gods' doing. When we initially meet him, he's sleeping heavily — until awakened by a messenger of revengeful Juno, who goads him into rage and carnage.

The "Aeneid" is suffused with a fascinating, upending sense that most of what goes gravely wrong on earth isn't imputable to human agency. There's something comforting to Virgil's conception of humanity, in which relatively little malice and unreasonableness and rapacity seem innate to our kind. And there's something unsettling as well — a vision of a world that would be safer and more secure if only the heavens

were emptied. (It's a vision perhaps familiar to those of us who sometimes feel we'd be better off if our own gods, whose Mount Olympus is Capitol Hill, would all go away.)

Fagles converts Virgil's hexameters into variable lines, long and flexible. The result is free verse, with the ghost of a hexameter serving as loose armature:

Wars and a man I sing — an exile driven on
by Fate,
he was the first to flee the coast of Troy,
destined to reach Lavinian shores and
Italian soil,
yet many blows he took on land and sea
from the gods above. ...

The issue of line length poses a fundamental and perhaps an irresolvable dilemma. Between the Latin hexameter and the standard English line for long narrative poems — iambic pentameter — lies an unbridgeable chasm. The Latin line simply contains more information than can reliably be packed into its English counterpart. The translator must then make a choice. Does he go with a long-line approximation of the Latin (at the risk of producing an ungainly English unit that tends to sag in the middle)? Or will he, in allegiance to English poetic traditions, adopt something shorter (at the risk of losing the feel of the expansive original)? It's a question that every major translator of the "Aeneid" — a list that includes John Dryden, C. Day Lewis, Rolfe Humphries and Robert Fitzgerald — has confronted.

Fitzgerald's translation, which appeared in 1983, has long served as my own standard edition, and to read him side by side with Fagles is fascinating. Fitzgerald employs a taut shorter line (iambic pentameter, with many truncations — a meter he subtly loosens and tightens as he goes along), and in moments of great lyrical intensity his version regularly seems tenser, richer. Here is the Trojan horse being hauled into the city:

. . . Everyone
Pitched in to get the figure underpinned
With rollers, hempen lines around the neck.
Deadly, pregnant with enemies, the horse
Crawled upward to the breach.

(Fitzgerald)

We breach our own ramparts, fling our
defenses open,
all pitch into the work. Smooth running
rollers
we wheel beneath its hoofs, and heavy
hempen ropes
we bind around its neck, and teeming with
men-at-arms
the huge deadly engine climbs our city
walls ...

(Fagles)

Here is Dido, at wit's end, portrayed just before her suicide:

She prayed then to whatever power may
care
In comprehending justice for the grief
Of lovers bound unequally by love.

(Fitzgerald)

And then to any Power above, mindful,
evenhanded,
who watches over lovers bound by unequal
passion,
Dido says her prayers.

(Fagles)

And here — my favorite passage in the poem — is the moment when ever dutiful Aeneas, with his exhausted, despairing father at his side, balances the awesome burdens of past and future:

So I resigned myself, picked up my father,
And turned my face toward the mountain
range.

(Fitzgerald)

So I gave way at last and
lifting my father, headed toward the
mountains.

(Fagles)

Yet if the blazing moments belong to Fitzgerald, there's a capaciousness to Fagles's line well suited to this vast story's ebb and flow. Aeneas is a storm-tossed man — the epic opens with shipwreck on the coast of Africa — and Fagles renders the pilgrimage in cadences that are encompassing without feeling cluttered. As Fitzgerald surely would have agreed, the sea has many voices, and this is one of them.

You might say it's Aeneas' peculiar storybook fate to wander the seas for years, in "Odyssey" fashion, only to find landfall on the shores of the "Iliad." In Book 7, when the extended campaign against the Rutulians begins, Aeneas' private self basically drops away, as it must, for his military responsibilities as commander in chief eclipse all else. Inner voices are another casualty of the din of war.

As a literary creation, Aeneas is marvelous for the way this most powerful and influential of warriors seems the least free of men. He is laying the cornerstones for an empire without precedent, which will (a complement to the biblical fiat lux) impose a fiat lex across the earth: Roman notions of law and order will eventually prevail from the Irish Sea to the Caspian, from Russia to Morocco. Yet Aeneas himself evidently has little say in the matter. If left to his own devices, he would contentedly remain with Dido in Africa, where life is sheltered and the pleasures of the flesh are dizzyingly sweet. But his country calls him — which is to say, the gods have other plans.

Virgil openly pays tribute to Homer, in both imagery and incident. (It seems there is nothing, not even the will of the gods, so inescapable as literary convention.) If the "Aeneid" can hardly match the "Iliad" as a portrait of war, in some regards the successor excels the model. The "Aeneid" hauntingly captures the psyche of a weathered soldier who has had enough — but who cannot declare he's had enough until a lasting peace is secured. By the time battered Aeneas reaches the shores of Italy, he's the least bloodthirsty of men, praying his people can cohabit tranquilly with the Rutulians. Down the centuries, the "Aeneid" has doubtless spoken with special poignancy to veteran commanders all over the world, who can read their own lives in an ancient poem composed when bows and arrows were the cutting edge in aerial warfare.

The “Aeneid” contains two significant passages of prophetic outreach, when the present vanishes away and neighboring centuries reveal themselves like sunlit valleys in a clearing fog. The first arises when Aeneas, visiting his father in the Underworld, beholds the ramifying glories of Rome’s coming empire. The second occurs when Vulcan forges him a shield on which centuries of triumph are chronicled:

He knows nothing of these events but takes
delight
in their likeness, lifting onto his shoulders
now
the fame and fates of all his children’s
children.

Virgil also looks backward, reminding us how the Trojans and their city, gleaming on the dawn-struck outskirts of Asia, eventually came to dust. And how even the victorious Greeks came to dust. But Rome — he assures his readers — will never fade.

Virgil was wrong, and it’s one of the most gorgeous ironies of the “Aeneid” that while it celebrates the political — the founding of an empire, by the young and potent and brave — as the summit of human achievement, its greater and more durable feat lies elsewhere. The triumph is ultimately literary, of course, and also collective — since it belongs in part to those white-haired translators who have brought such well-seasoned judgments to a timeless tale. Theirs is the prevailing army, among whose ranks Robert Fagles emerges as a new and noble standard-bearer.

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