

# CROSSROADS

An interdisciplinary journal for the study  
of history, philosophy, religion and classics

VOLUME II ISSUE I 2007

ISSN: 1833-878X

Pages 79-81

## Lillian Goldsmith

Book Review - *Virgil*, 'The Aeneid Publius Vergilius Maro'

### BIOGRAPHY

Lillian Goldsmith is a final year Arts/Law student, who plans on beginning a Masters degree in political science and EU studies in France in 2008. She has fond memories of last period Latin on a Friday spent translating Virgil, Ovid and other Latin writers. Somehow Virgil always made the time pass quicker!

**BOOK REVIEW - VIRGIL, *THE AENEID* PUBLIUS VERGILIUS MARO TRANS. BY ROBERT FAGLES, 2006. VIKING PENGUIN: LONDON, UK**

Proclaimed as ‘the principal secular book of the Western World,’ copies of *The Aeneid* have been circulating constantly for the past two millennia. Robert Fagles’s 2006 translation has not been in stores for quite so long, but has been well-received by contemporary audiences. *The Aeneid*’s central themes of empire and citizen still resonate in today’s international hegemonic arena – the decline of the old, the establishment of the new, the emergence of crucial international alliances and enmities. Ideas of loyalty and virtue, love and familial values have also remained constant. Most importantly, however, Fagle has attempted to reproduce the lyrical beauty of the original Latin text in all its meandering complexity. Although well-prepped by his previous work translating Homer’s famous *Illiad* and *The Odyssey*, there is little doubt that translating Virgil is vastly difficult. The ancient poet was an undisputed master, whose technique still wields sway over Western literary tradition. Fresh, evocative similes; gory, almost pornographic battle-scenes; idyllic descriptions of scintillating, shimmering, heavenly beauty – translation is always an inexact science, even more so when the author is Virgil. Fagle has, however, created a commendable English rendering.

*The Aeneid* is an epic narrative, stuffed full of action, superheroes, gods, beautiful women, magical creatures, enchanted plants – which alternately glitter gold or ooze blood – and cryptic clues. An ancient style of poetry, the epic was first popularised by the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* over four thousand years ago. Virgil begins his epic where Homer’s *Iliad* lets off, at the fall of Troy. *The Aeneid* deals with the subsequent travels of a Trojan prince, Aeneas, as he flees Troy and attempts to found a new empire: Rome. It is crucial to a deeper understanding of *The Aeneid* to appreciate ‘where the money was coming from’. Virgil wrote under the patronage of the Emperor Augustus, at the end of a century of Roman civil war and at the beginning of the establishment of the Roman Empire. Pre-empting 19<sup>th</sup> century European nationalist movements, Augustus wanted the conscious creation of a common myth of origin for the Roman Empire. Virgil was required to lay the foundations for a common heritage, culture and identity, which the Emperor could then harness for political leadership.

Virgil thus depicts for Augustus both the ideal citizen and the ideal society. Central to the text is the idea of *pietas*. More than just the idea of piety, *pietas* encompasses patriotism, filial obligation, moral righteousness and devotion to the Gods. A man who displays these attributes will be a worthy citizen of the Roman Empire. *Pietas* is continually emphasised throughout *The Aeneid*: Aeneas traipses round the Mediterranean because it is his duty to found Rome, not due to latent wanderlust. However, in his wisdom, Virgil does not depict Aeneas as a superman – the hero is mortal and fallible and occasionally needs to be reminded of where his ultimate responsibilities lie. With divine prompting Aeneas overcomes temptation – such as the succour of the lovely Dido – and fulfils his destiny. Aeneas creates a state to “*bring the entire world beneath the rule of law.*”

Thus, Virgil recreates for his audience the founding of the mighty Roman Empire. In doing so, he also establishes Augustus’ ideal of Empire. The individual hero establishes a mighty Empire through hardship and war. Out of the ruins and the wreckage (the parallels with Augustus’ time are clear) a new era emerges. Deep in the Underworld as the glorious rows of future Roman heroes march before Aeneas, Anchises reminds his dazzled son of Rome’s mission:

But you, Roman, remember, rule with all your power  
the peoples of the earth--these will be your arts:  
to put your stamp on the works and ways of peace,  
to spare the defeated, break the proud in war.

Augustus hath spoken. For those new to Virgil, the introduction to Fagles’ work by Bernard Knox provides excellent commentary. Knox seeks to embed *The Aeneid*’s relevance in a contemporary political setting. Fagles’ postscript also talks about the constant theme of empire and its price, observing that “it seems to be a price we keep on paying, in the loss of blood and treasure, time-worn faith and hard-won hope, down to the present day.”

It is possible, however, to ignore the political background to *The Aeneid* and simply enjoy it on its merits as a fantastic story. Divided into twelve chapters, or books, Book One introduces our cast. The opening sequences depict the fuming goddess Juno as the nemesis of the tale. She is almost comic as she sulks: “*Defeated, am I? Give up the fight?*” Spiteful, prideful and vengeful she persuades the God of the Winds to call down a fierce storm on the fleeing Trojan boats:

...Out charge the winds...Down they crash upon the sea...heaving up huge killer-breakers, rolling towards the beaches. The crews are shouting, cables screeching – suddenly cloud banks blotting out the sky...as pitch-black night comes brooding down on the sea, with thunder crashing pole to pole, bolt on bolt blazing across the heavens – death, everywhere men facing instant death.

Saved by Neptune (not out of any real concern for the foundering Trojans, merely because he objects to the noise down below), the Trojans reach sanctuary in the arms of a beautiful Phoenician princess, Dido.

Book Two opens with Aeneas explaining his sudden arrival to Dido, and narrating his travels up to that point. The plot diverts back and the reader follows Aeneas as he escapes burning Troy. He runs through the streets of Troy in billowing clouds of smoke with huge stone buildings crashing around him, searching for his family amongst the ruins and evading vengeful gods and marauding superheroes as they sack the city. Dido is impressed. Now Dido is a beautiful, single princess setting up a city, and Aeneas is a handsome, newly-widowed prince with good DIY skills. They consummate their lust in what is surely one of the most memorable love-scenes of all Antiquity: trapped in a high mountain cave, as the heavens crash and sheets of water pour down around them, lightning flares, and nymphs scream on the surrounding mountain peaks. Brad Pitt and Rose Byrne in a tent have got nothing on them. But *pietas* calls Aeneas onwards to Empire and glory, and unhappy Dido is doomed to suffer without him.

Another highlight of *The Aeneid* in Fagles' translation is *Book VI: The Kingdom of the Dead*. A perennial favourite with Latin students, Book VI reads like a well-rendered video game in all its hyper-coloured flashing glory. Aeneas must find the golden bough before he can gain access to the secret underworld. He must also befriend a beautiful priestess to guide him past "*the very Jaws of Hades*" – the Gates of Hell, and once inside convince the dreaded Charon to take him across the river Styx. The soundtrack plays the screams and groans of the dead, the thumping of chains and the hiss and bubble of sulphur. Once he has drugged the vicious, three-headed Cerberus with honeyed corn, Aeneas dashes to the cave entrance and eventually escapes to the next level of the game: "*Land of Joy, the pleasant green places in the Fortunate Woods, where are the Homes of the Blest.*"

Yet for all his supernatural exploits, Aeneas is not a God. He is malleable, vulnerable and frighteningly mortal, tossed around by the whims of the Gods. Perhaps it is this aspect of his character that makes him most interesting to us. He is a helpless individual caught up in a whirlwind of fate beyond his command. At the same time, he shows a surprising inner-strength and depth of character. Fagles preserves this aspect of Aeneas well. The translator has not been overawed by tradition, however. Indeed, he has foregone the traditional meter and produced a work in freeform English. Arguably, this makes the work all the more accessible to the modern reader. Furthermore, Fagles has acted bravely in dispensing with the customary opening line: *Arma virumque cano*, historically translated as "*Of arms and a man*" has been rendered by Fagles as, "*Wars and a man I sing*". It is worth noting that a repeated criticism of the Fagles' edition has been directed at the scarcity of explanatory notes throughout, an issue to be addressed perhaps in subsequent editions.

Ultimately, any translator of Virgil must bear in mind that he is dealing with an undisputed masterpiece. The most pressing need then, is to ensure that the accessibility of the work to modern audiences. Fagles' has produced a beautifully-worded edition that has done just that. Recent increases in Latin scholarship fans hope that more people will experience the sheer, unmitigated wonder that is translating Virgil's *Aeneid* from the Latin, for themselves. Until that happy day, Fagles' latest translation provides a very decent approximation of the original work.