Title
Selections from the Georgics

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1cm7d9d6

Journal
Translation Studies Journal, 2(1)

ISSN
1555-8614

Authors
Virgil, --
Johnson, Kimberly

Publication Date
2007

Peer reviewed
Translators’ Preface

Kimberly Johnson

Many English translations of the Georgics elect to render its hexameter lines in prose, recognizing that it is nearly impossible to approximate in English the quantitative meter of Virgil’s Latin (which measures its lines according to the length of vowel sounds). Other translations, following perhaps the model of John Dryden’s influential seventeenth-century rendering of the poem, use iambic pentameter, which traditionally has been thought, because of its stately pace and suggestiveness of the natural human breath-span, to provide a rough equivalent of dactylic hexameter. This translation departs from those conventions, adopting instead a loose meter most reminiscent, perhaps, of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “sprung rhythm,” with five to six stressed positions in each line. This metrical strategy is meant to acknowledge the dynamic quality of Virgil’s lines, in which the metrical structure asserts itself in counterpoint to the natural stress of individual words. It also enacts the agility of the original meter, which allowed the unstressed position to be occupied by either a single syllable or two syllables. This translation has made a particular effort to replicate the syntactic experience of reading Virgil’s Latin, to preserve original structure as far as possible. Although this tactic occasionally results in English sentences that require slower reading, it does go some way toward preserving the linear accumulation of detail in the poem, an important consideration in a work so conscious of structure and the accumulation of tension through details. Moreover, Virgil’s attention to the etymological connection between poetry and plowing—contained in the roots of the word verse, versure, to turn—recommends at least some endeavor on the part of the translator to sow the details of language in order, so that they can be reaped with their original associations intact.
GEORGICS 2.136-176

Sed neque Medorum, silvae ditissima, terra,
nec pulcher Ganges atque auro turbidus Hermus
laudibus Italicæ certent, non Bactra neque Indi
totaque turiferis Panchaia pinguis harenis.
Haec loca non tauri spirantes naribus ignem
invertere satís inmanis dentibus hydri
nec galeis densissque virum seges horruit hastis;
sev grvidæ fruges et Bacchi Massicus humor
inplevere; tenent oleae armentatae laeta.
Hinc bellator æquus campo sese arduus infert;
hinc albi, Clitumnæ, greges et maxima taurus
victimæ, saepe tuo perfusi flumine sacro,
Romanos ad tempula dum duxere triumphos.
Hic ver asiduum atque alienis mensibus aëstas
bis grvidæ pecudes, bis pomis utilis arbos.
At rhabdae tigres absunt et saeva leonum
semina nec miseræ fallunt aconita legentis
nec rapit inmensos orbis per humum neque tanto
squameus in spiram tractum se colligit anguis.
Addte tot egregias urbes operumque laborem,
tot congestæ manu praeruptæ oppida saxis
fluminaque antiquos subter labentia muros.
An mare, quod supra, memorem, quodque aduit infra
anne lacus tantos? Te, Lari maxume, teque,
fluctibus et fremitu adsurgens Benace marino
an memorem portus Lucrinæque addita claustra
atque indignatum magnis stridoribus aequor

GEORGICS 2.136-176

The Praises of Italy

Neither Media, opulent in her woodlands,
nor the gorgeous Ganges, nor Hermon strewn with gold
can rival Italy's glories—neither Bactra nor India
nor Panchaia duned with thurifying sand.
Here no bulls with nostrils snorting flame
harrowed for planting a dragon's monstrous teeth,
no human harvest bristled up with helmets and serried spears
but bursting fruits and Bacchus's Massic nectar
freight us, olives and fat flocks hold sway.
Here warhorses charge haughty on the field,
here white herds of bulls, the noblest sacrifice—
washe often by your holy waters, o Clitumnus—
have led Roman triumphs to the altars of the gods.
Here is spring eternal, and summer in unwozted months,
twice calve the cows, twice the tree is fit for fruit.
But nowhere raving tigers, nor the lion's savage brood,
no monkshed dupes hapless cullers,
nor darts the scaly snake his looping bulk across the marl
nor clench his vast train up in a coil.
And reckon all the remarkable cities, monuments of toil,
so many towns heaped with hands upon stony steeps
with rivers underflowing ancient walls.
Should I mention the sea, laying the shore up north
and down south, or our great lakes? You, Como most splendid,
Benacus surging with swells and thunderous like the sea?
Should I mention ports, or the breakwater upon Lucrine,
or the water's roaring clamor at the affront
Iulia qua ponto longe sonat unda refuso
Tyrhenusque fretis inmittitur aestus Avernis?
Haec eadem argenti rivos aerisque metalla
ostendit venis atque auro plurima fluxit.
Haec genus acre virum, Marsos pubemque Sabellam
adsuetumque malo Ligurem Volcosque verutos
extulit, haec Decios, Marios, magnosque Camillos,
Scipiadus duros bello et te, maxume Caesar,
qui nunc extremis Asiae iam victor in oris
inbellem avertis Romanis arcibus Indum.
Salve, magna parens frugum, Saturnia tellus,
magnam virum; tibi res antiquae laudis et artem
ingredior, sanctos ausus recludere fontis,
Ascræumque cano Romana per oppida carmen.

where far the Julian waves boom as the bore gurgles back
upon itself and the Tyrrenian tide pours into Avernus froth?
This land flaunts her silver rills, the copper lode
in her veins, and with gold abundant flows,
She bore a flinty race of men—Marsians and the Sabine youth,
the Ligurian inured to plight, the Volscian dartmen,
Deciuses and Mariuses and mighty Camilluses,
war-tempered Scipios...and you, greatest Caesar,
who already victor on the farthest fronts of Asia now
fend the unwary Indian from the fortresses of Rome.
Hail exalted mother of fruits, Saturnian land,
exalted mother of men! For you the theme and craft
of ancient praise I undertake, daring to unseal the sacred springs
and sing through Roman plazas the song of Ascra.
By turns, the care of sires starts to wane, the care of dams to wax. When, their months accomplished, swag-bellied they range let no one allow them in yoke to drag heavy carts, or leaping to pass their way, or at a brisk gallop to devour the meadow's breadth, or to swim in eddying streams. In open glades the herdsmen graze them, and along the brimming river, where moss and greenest banks of grass, where coves may shelter, rock-shadows may lie outstretched. There is among the Silaran woods and greened holms of Alburnus a swarming fly, whose Roman name is asilus, called oestrus in the evolving Greek, aggressive, shrilly buzzing, before whom terrified the whole herd stampedes the forest; the shocked ether crazes at their bellowings, and the woods, and the droughted banks of Tanager. With this monster Juno once worked her dreadful wrath, who hatched a plague for Inachus’s daughter, heifered Io. This too (for under sultry noon more fierce its torment) you must fend from the pregnant flock, and pasture the herd with the sun fresh up or when stars lead down the night.

After calving every care devolves upon the calves. Straightway the stockmen see them with a brand and mark their caste: those they want to rear for the herd's sustaining, those to keep sacred for the altars, those to tear the soil and busting clods to upturn the ragged fields. The other cattle are grazed among green grasses. Those you will mold for pluck and rustic work coax while yet calves, and enter in the way of training while plant their young spirits, while nimble their age. First, slack loops of slender willow tie around their necks. Then, when their freeborn necks get used to servitude, yoke them in pairs.
Iunge pares et coge gradum conferre iuvencos;
atque illis iam saepe rotae ducantur inanes
per terram et summo vestigia pulvere signent;
post valido nitens sub pondere faginus axis
instrep et junctos temo trahat aereus orbes.
Interea pubi indomilae non gramina tantum
 nec vesicas salicum frondes ulvamque palustrem,
sed frumenta manu carpes sata; nec tibi fetae
more patrum nivea implebunt multaria vaccae,
sed tota in dulcis consument ubera natos.
Sin ad bella magis studium turmasque fercis,
aut Alpea rotis praebi filumina Pisae
et lovis in luco currus agitare volantis:
primus equi labor est, animos atque arma videre
bellantium litusque pati tractuque gementem
ferre rotam et stabulo frenos audire sonantis;
tum magis atque magis blandis gaudere magistri
laudibus et plausae sonitum cervicis amare.
Atque haec iam primo depulsus ab ubere matris
audat, inque vicem det mollibus ora capistris
invalidus etiamque tremens, etiam inscius aevi.
At tribus exactis ubi quarta accesserit aestas,
carpere mox gyrum incipiat gradibusque sonare
compositis sinuque alterna volumina currum
sicut laborant simulis; tum cursibus aures,
tum vocet, ac per aperta volans ceu liber habenis
aequore vix summa vestigia ponat harenae;
quales Hyperboreis Aquilo cum densus ab oris
incubuit; Scythiaque hiemes atque arida differt
nubila: tum segetes altae campique natantes
lenibus horrescunt flabris summareaque sonorem
dant silvae longique urgent ad litora fluctus;
ille volat simul arva fuga, simul aequora verrense
Hinc vel ad Elei metas et maxuma campi
from those same halters fastened, and urge the steers keep step together;
and often now let unloaded carts be dragged by them
across the land, grooving only the topmost dust.
Later beneath a rugged weight let the greased beech axle
creak, a bronzed tongue to pull the wheels.
Meanwhile give their untamed youth not just meadowgrass
nor half-browsed willow leaves and marshy sedge
but hand-plucked grain. Your brood cows will not
brim their snowy milk-pails in the custom of our fathers
but all their udder squander on their darling calves.

But if for war you hanker more, for squadrons brave,
or to glide on wheels beside Pisa’s river Alpheus,
through Jovian groves to drive the chariot to flight...
the horse’s first task is to witness the nerve
and weaponry of warriors, to endure the clarion, to stomach the groan
of the dragged wheel, and in the stall to hear bits jangling,
then more and more to thrill at the honeyed praises of the trainer,
to love the sound of his neck patted.
All this let him tackle as soon as he’s weaned from his mother’s teat,
and bit by bit let him tend his mouth to soft halters
while weak and trembling still, still green in years.
But when, three summers having passed, the fourth draws nigh,
let him start to storm around the training course, to ring his paces
evenly, and let him bow the alternating flexion of his legs;
let him be as exertion’s self. Then let him challenge
the wind to lapse, and over the exposed flats flying, as unreined,
barely set his hoofprint in the surface sand.
As when from Hyperborean coasts the clenchèd northwind
hammers down, shoving Scythian frosts before it
and rainless clouds, then tall wheatfields and the marine plain
ripple in the gentle gusts, the treetops rustle and long
toward the shoreline rollers press,
and on it soars, swift, sweeping soil and seas the same.
A horse like that will sweat the vast courses of the plain
sudabit spatia et spumas aget ore cruentas,
Belgica vel molli melius feret esseda collo.
Tum demum crassa magnum farragine corpus
crescere iam domitis sinito: namque ante domandum
ingentis tollent animos prensique negabunt
verbera lenta pati et duris parere lupatis.

toward the finish posts at Elis, and blow bloody foam from his mouth,
or will bear the Belgian chariot more bravely, steady of neck.
At last with thick mash let their bodies plump
after they've been broken in—before their breaking,
immoderate they rouse their spunk, and caught they scorn
to truckle to the limber lash, to heed the jagged bit.