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Douglas and Virgil

Notes and Documents

Douglas and Virgil

Nearly fifty years ago Pound suggested that Gavin Douglas "gets more poetry out of Virgil than any other transaltor." This is indeed possible, but it may be truer to say that the poetry Douglas "gets out of" Virgil is in fact what Douglas "puts in," those happy extensions of the original whereby an abstraction becomes colourful and particular. Of Dido in the underworld Virgil uses the phrase:

> recens a vulnere (VI 450-51)

and Douglas gives us:

> The greyn wound gapand in hir breist all new (VI vii 57)

And in his description of the fight between Dares and Entellus Virgil writes another close-packed balanced line:

> Immiscentque manus manibus, pugnamque lacessunt (V 429)

but Douglas expands this to eight lines in which the very words whack and dodge and echo:

> Now, hand to hand, the dynt lychtis with a swak;
> Now bendis he vp hys burdon with a mynt,
> On syde he bradis fortil eschew the dynt;
> He etlys yondir hys avantage to tak,
> He metis hym thar, and charris hym with a chak;
> He watis to spy, and smytis in al hys mycht,
> The tother keppys hym on hys burdon wycht;
> Thai foyn at othir, and eggis to bargane. (V viii 10-17)

Later, Pound added to his suggestion. In "How to Read" (1929) he said that Douglas' *Eneados* is "better than the original, as Douglas had heard the sea." Then in *ABC of Reading* (1934) he referred to *Eneados* I iii 13-21 (quoted in part below) and said: "in such passages as this I get considerably more pleasure from the Bishop of Dunkeld than from the original highly-cultured but non-seafaring author."

There is a specious element in the argument here: it seems to suggest that in their descriptions of (say) the sea both Virgil and Douglas had the same intention and were using different languages in the same way and that Douglas did it better than Virgil. But is this so? When Douglas adds to his original he is localising his effects, using his language as a

robust sensuous medium for exciting the eye and ear of the reader's imagination: he was surely aware that he was setting about this in a manner quite different from that of his model. For instance, one of the supreme virtues of the Scots language is its ability to describe certain types of bad weather: it is in such descriptions that we find much of the "poetry" which Douglas "puts into" Virgil. The use of language is perhaps un-Virgilian and the content is uncalled for by the standards of strict translation but without it Douglas' *Eneados* would be sadly diminished. There follow some examples from the account of the storm in Book One.

Referring to Aeolus' cave Virgil has "vasto antro" (I 52) for which Douglas gives "In gowsty cavys" (I ii 6): "gowsty" for "vasto" is singularly apt. Virgil's cave is big; Douglas' is also draughty. The winds rush out:

terras turbine perflant (I 83)

has its own virtues as a poetic statement but in the Scots line

And with a quhirl blew all the erth about (I ii 52)

the words themselves sound as if they are whirling about. This movement from the abstract to the more energetic is characteristic.

venti velut agmine facto
. . . ruunt . . . (I 82-3)

becomes:

wyndis brade in a rout (I ii 51)

"Rout," an exploding boisterous rush, is surely more pungent than "agmen," which can hardly be divested of its connotation of military discipline. A few lines further on "ruunt" is translated "rowit," which not only preserves a close similarity in sound but also seems to me more vivid than any possible English alternative. A like use of the fortuitously vivid native word ("busteously") and the retention of some of the original sound effects (the alliteration in "vastos volvunt" and "wallis welteris") can be seen when

incubuere mari, totumque a sedibus imis
. . . et vastos volvunt as litora fluctus (I 84-6)

becomes:

Thai ombeset the seys bustuusly,
Quhil fra the deip til euery cost fast by
The huge wallis weltris apon hie, (I ii 53-5)

In the next line Douglas expands and adds his own alliteration.

strudorque rudentum (I 87)

has within its own sound the strain and groan of tackle under stress. Douglas gives:

The takillis graslis, cabillis can fret and frays. (I ii 60)

But an even better piece of alliteration follows where

intonuere poli (I 90)

becomes a line as rough as anything in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*:

The firmament gan rummylling rair and rout (I ii 64)

There are occasions when Douglas' effects are more straightforward than his model's.

insequitur cumulo praeruptus aquae mons (I 105)

has a measured inevitability and the sound and order of the words act out their meaning. The line piles up through "cumulo," explodes in "praeruptus" and thuds down on "mons." The Scots version is longer, more direct but less subtle and forceful:

Heich as a hill the iaw of watir brak
And in ane hepe cam on thame with a swak. (I iii 21-22)

Again I think Virgil has the advantage in

furit aestus harenis (I 107)

because

The stour vp bullyrrit sand as it war wode (I iii 26)

loses through dilution what it gains by using "stour" and "bullyrrit"; "as it war wode" is a conventional tag.

A similar exercise in comparison directed to another sea-passage, the race in Book Five, would have comparable results. The tendency to particularise, for instance, is still there:

apricis statio gratissima mergis (V 128)

must have been too general for Douglas for he cannot help describing what every boatman sees on a Scottish coast:

A standing place, quhar skarthis with thar bekis,
Forgane the son, glaidly thame pronye and bekis. (V iii 49-50)

(Douglas' word for cormorant is still in use, though the form I have heard in Caithness and Sutherland is "scarf.")

Both the strength and the weakness of Douglas can be seen in his rendering of

ferit aethera clamor
nauticus (V 140-1)

for while ferit/clamor becomes a vigorous banging line:

Vpsprang the clamour, and the rerd furth went (V iii 72)

aethera/nauticus becomes a line quite lame, despite the alliteration:

Heich in the skyis, of mony maryner. (V iii 73)

To say that Douglas' success in translating Virgil is of a particular and limited kind must not be taken as carping; nor must it be allowed to

suggest that Douglas was unaware of the limitations of the vernacular. Like all medieval translators, he was only too acutely aware of this and his complaint is only one of many:

> Sum tyme I follow the text als neir I may,
> Sum tyme I am constrenyt ane other way.
> Besyde Latyn our langage is imperfite
> Quhilk in sum part is the causs and the wyte
> Quhy that of Virgillis verss the ornate bewte
> Intill our tung may nocht obseruyt be, (Prol. I 357 ff.)

But as usual such complaints are not to be taken all that seriously: certainly not in face of the prologues Douglas added to the separate books of the *Aeneid*. There the energy of language which is released only now and then in the course of translation is unfettered. Has anyone else described a Scottish winter quite like this? —

> Thik drumly scuggis dyrknyt so the hevyn,
> Dym skyis oft furth warpit feirfull levyn,
> Flaggis of fire, and mony felloun flaw,
> Scharpe soppys of sleit and of the snypand snaw. (Prol. VII)

ROBIN FULTON
THE EDINBURGH ACADEMY

Home's *Douglas* and Wully Shakspeare

Home's *Douglas* is now remembered chiefly for its coy periphrasis for pregnancy (I.i), "My name is Norval" etc. (II.i), and a remark from the audience at its first performance, which took place in Edinburgh on 14 December 1756. An example of the orthodox version of this last incident may be found in James C. Dibdin's *Annals of the Edinburgh Stage* (Edinburgh, 1888, p. 87):

> At the first performance of *Douglas,* when Young Norval was busily employed giving out one of his rodomontading speeches, a canny Scot, who had been observed to grow more and more excited as the piece progressed, unable longer to contain his feelings, called out with evident pride, 'Whaur's yer Wully Shakspere noo!'

It is difficult to establish when this story first came into being. David Hume's dedication of his *Four Dissertations* (London, 1757, pp. v-vi) to Home refers in general to the play and ends with a reference to its enthusiastic reception in the theatre:

> But the unfeigned tears which flowed from every eye, in the numerous representations which were made of it on this theatre; the unparalleled com-