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Florence Ridley

The Distinctive Character of Douglas’s *Eneados*

The earliest English translation of Vergil's *Aeneid* was begun in 1512, and completed, "Apon the fest of Mary Magdelan, / Fra Crystis byrth, the dait quha list to heir, / A thousand fyve hundreth and thretteyn 3eir."¹ This achievement, a truly monumental one for the space of a single year, was that of a member of Scotland's powerful clan Douglas: Gawin, Bishop of Dunkeld.

The Bishop's translation of the 12 books of Vergil, to which he joined a 13th by Mapheus Vegius and prologues for each of the 13, has many claims to fame. It is a first rendering in the language of a major classic; a treasure trove for early linguists, who found therein not only a wealth of imports from French and Latin, but a key to the mysteries of Anglo-Saxon. In the 17th century, William L'isle, approaching Old English by way of "Dutch, both high and low," wrote that, "At length I lighted on Virgil, Scottished by the Reverand Gawin Douglas...the best translation of that Poet that ever I read: and though I found that dialect more hard than any of the former (as nearer the Saxon, because farther from the Norman), yet with help of the Latine I made shift to understand it, and read the book more than once from beginning to the end. Wherby I must confesse I got more knowledge that I sought than by any of the other."² Thus with Vergil serving
The Distinctive Character of Douglas's Eneados

as a kind of trot, L'isle read Douglas, the more familiar Latin shedding much needed light upon the obscure "Scottis," which then served to illuminate its close cousin, Anglo-Saxon. Surrey's translation of books 2 and 4 of the Aeneid could never have come into being without the Eneados, for in producing his own work the English poet mined that of his Scots predecessor for a multitude of well-chosen words and phrases. Douglas's prologue to book I contains the first analysis in English of the art of translation; and here he lays out an apologia which could serve for any translator of any time or place.

R. W. B. Lewis speaks of "the difficulty of translating the whole or any part of" Vergil's "extraordinary poem," and at times there is almost a hint of despair in Douglas's description of his attempts to cope with the "scharp sugurate sang Virgiliane, / Sa wysly wrocht with nevir a word invane." To the extent his wit might stretch, he has done his best "Virgillis versys to follow and no thing feyn" (II, 10, line 266). Yet he knows, has clearly come to know during the process of translating, that "to follow a fixt sentens or mater / Is mair deficill and far strater... / Than forto write all ways at liberte" (II, 11, lines 290-2). Bound to Vergil's text as he is, he must "hald hys verss and go nane other way" (II, 11, line 304); unless some history, subtle word, or rime causes him to digress. Even Chaucer could not follow Vergil word by word, though he said he could, for "Sum tyme the text mon haue ane expositioun, / Sum tyme the colloor will causs a litle additioun, / And sum tyme of a word I mon make thre" (II, 12, lines 347-9). Douglas's consistent goal of reflecting Vergil's literal content faithfully has often caused him for the sake of meaning to let eloquence go by the board. Since "The bewte of his ornate eloquens / May nocht al tyme be kepit with the sentens" (II, 14, lines 393-4), torn between desire to reproduce the effect of the poetry, or to convey its literal content, he has chosen the latter course.

Douglas's purpose was to bring Vergil to his countrymen in their own tongue, "Wryte sum savoryng of thyne Eneados" (II, 4, line 44), so that its "facund sentence mycht be song / In our langage alsweill as Latyn tong--" (II, 4, lines 39-40). And to this end he has taken pains, "forsuyth... / As that I couth to mak it braid and plane, / Kepand na sudron bot our awyn langage, / And spekis as I lernyt quhen I was page" (II, 6, lines 110-2). But therein lay his problem; or a large part of it. For compared to Latin, his language was found wanting: "thar be Latyn wordis mony ane / That in our leyd ganand translatioune hass none" (II, 13, lines 363-4).

In view of his "tungis penuryte" (II, 14, line 380), how could Douglas hope to capture the effect of Vergilian imagery,
its ability, noted by Lewis, to intensify, illuminate, and carry forward the action of the poem? Or the sweet harmony of sound noted by Dryden: "Vergil's words are not only chosen, but the places in which he ranks them, for the sound; he who removes them from the station wherein their master sets them, spoils the harmony." Douglas was hampered in his attempts to achieve any such harmony not only by the relatively limited Middle Scots vocabulary from which he could choose, but by its difference in sound from the Latin of Vergil which resulted from its multitude of hard, harsh Scandinavian derivatives, and also by his meter.

His vehicle was the heroic couplet, which made the task of coping with Vergil's flexible, sensuous line much more difficult, for the form almost demanded that Douglas's ideas be expressed in units of two lines. He does employ enjambment, but most of his lines tend to be end-stopped, even if by a barely perceptible pause, and obviously his couplet form was not designed to reproduce most successfully the sweep of unrimed Vergilian statement.

And yet, whatever the difficulties he faced of language and meter, and whatever charges his critics might level at his work:

Thocht sum wald swer that I the text haue variet,
Or that I haue this volume quyte myscareit,
Or threpe playnly that I come nevir neir hand it,
Or at the wark is wers than evir I fand it,
Or git argue Virgill stude well befor...

(II, 17, lines 485-9)

Vergil had never stood well written in their tongue before his translation. And some 400 years later, Ezra Pound could stoutly maintain that Gawin Douglas, "gets more poetry out of Vergil than any other translator." Pound was a poet himself, and had reasons for his contention. Upon what was it based? What did Douglas do to Vergil to "get more poetry out of" him than others have done? First it must be recognized, I think, that as Robin Fulton says, it is not so much what Douglas "gets out of" Vergil as what he puts in. His translation is on the whole accurate; but its interest and value, other than historical, lie in its additions to the original.

Essentially these additions are for the purpose of making the Aeneid comprehensible to his countrymen, and as relevant to their lives as possible. To this end Douglas replaces classical figures or objects with medieval ones. There are dukes and barons and admirals, madames and damsel in the Eneados. A ship is a "ballingaire," a bacchante, "Bacchus
Nun." "Wine"—vinum—becomes "Ypocras"; and among the constellations, instead of Arcturus and the twin oxen, there twinkle the familiar "Watling Streit," the "Horne," "Arthuris huyfe," and the "Charlewane."

In many passages Douglas interprets or explains. For example, in describing an aroused snake, he does not actually translate iras, but makes clear the danger of the serpent's wrath, "reddy to stang and to infek." Similarly to show effect, for atro veneno, he gives "vennome / Quhilk infeckis the flesh bliuide and banis." And makes excutior somno reveal what Aeneas does after being shaken from sleep: "I glistnyt of sleip and stert on feit." "Salsus...sudor" becomes not the literal "salt sweat," but "bittir terys sweat." The translating metaphor tells the audience not only of a miracle, but of its implication: an animate statue of a goddess comes alive and sweats; and Juno's physiological reflex, now producing "bitter tears," conveys her attitude. The goddess is sorely displeased, and the miracle is seen as an omen of disaster for the long-suffering Trojans.

Of course Douglas's purpose, to make the Aeneid as real and as understandable to his readers as possible, often forced him to be explicit in an un-Vergilian way. Edmond Schmidt comments with apparent approval that Douglas chose words which were more definite than many of the colorless and ambiguous ones in the Aeneid. But Vergil's use of flexible terms which take on meaning from their context, and of ambiguous words whose varied possibilities increase the implications of a passage, is not a flaw. It is, rather, one of his great achievements.

Douglas has a tendency to nail such words down, make them convey a single, specific concept and so lose the possibility of multiple connotations. For example, in rendering sedes Priami he gives only the limiting "palace of Priam," and loses the complex suggestiveness of Vergil's phrase, calling to mind the king's throne, his seat of power, dwelling place, home, the foundation of his government. And Douglas's "beyn desti­nate" denotes merely one relation between Iulus and his kingdom of Rome. The words cannot evoke the debt, the binding contract, obligation, owing, all implicit in the debentur of Vergil. Nor can Douglas adequately catch the suggestiveness compounded of silence, of irony, or of ambiguity, of the chameleon words which take on colour and strength from their context; or of the lingering echoes of sound and repetition of specific words, like those of the sad, fateful, "At regina," which block out the action of book 4, or of culpa which emphasize the "sin" of Dido.

Yet on the other hand, Douglas's expansions at times render Vergilian abstraction particular, energetic, vivid--tend to
localize effects, make them immediate, and so provocative of
the reader's imaginative sensuous response. *Nox atra polum
bigis subjacta tenebat*, literally "black night held the sky,
born upwards in her chariot" (pp. 494-5, line 721), becomes:
"...the dirk nycht / Rollyt his cart outhourt [athwart] the
polys bricht" (II, 231, line 101). Men live not just in "low
valleys," *habitans vilibus imis* (pp. 356-7, line 110), but
"dwelt in lugys [small huts] and mony littil caves" (II, 114,
line 82). The "hollowed rock," *rupe vavata* (pp. 362-3, line
229), where the Trojans encounter the Harpies becomes a "hyn-
gand heuch" (II, 121, line 40), with trees not just closest
about, *arboreis claues aitrum* (pp. 362-3, lines 229-30), but
"with treys coss bilappit round about, / And thik harsk
granyt pikis standing owt" (II, 121, lines 40-2). And these
Harpies are not just "ill-omened birds," *obsoenaque volucres*
(pp. 366-7, line 262), but "laithly owls" (II, 122, line 102),
who don't merely taint the Trojan's dishes with their lips,
*polluit ore dapes* (pp. 364-5, line 234), but "With thar vyle
mouthis infek thai al our mete" (II, 121, line 50). Vergil
assigns the Cyclopes, Polyphemus, a *vastro antro* (pp. 388-9,
line 617). Douglas makes his cave drafty as well as big:
"huge and gowsty hald" (II, 141, line 56). And his monster is
not simply *neq visum facilis*, "in aspect not happy" (pp. 388-9,
line 621), but "vgsum and grysly forto se" (II, 141, line 61).
He lies back "gruflyngis amyd his cave" (II, 142, line 65),
and drinks not just black blood, *sanguine atro* (pp. 388-9,
line 622), but purent matter as well, "worsum," and coagulated,
"lappyrrit," blood (II, 141, line 4).

Douglas, moreover, had a peculiarly northern knack for
adroit manipulation of alliteration in descriptions of dirty
weather, a characteristic which leads us to his most notable
artistic accomplishment, nature description. His evocation in
Prologues 7, 12, and 13 of, respectively, an icy December day,
when,

Bewtie was lost, and barrand schew the landis...
The tyme and sesson bittir, cald and paill,...
The grond fadyt...
Montane toppis slekit with snaw ourheildis,
On raggit rolkis of hard harsk quyn stane,
With frosyn frontis cauls clinty clewis schane
(III, 62, lines 41, 37-40;
p. 61, line 13)

or of a soft May morning, with its rising mists, glittering
streams, and blossoming earth; or of a June twilight near
Edinburgh, when he sees the sun set, evening star arise, and
the world become shrouded in misty night, have been widely and justly praised.

Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter believe that in these passages Douglas achieved a triumph of landscape as an independent art form, noting that here the verbal painting is detailed and panoramic, charged with a sensual response, organized with incomparable visualizing power, always with an eye to overall visual coherence, and generally characterized by a range and quality, sweep and energy of perception which even after 400 years are still newly impressive. But the same excellence they find in the prologues is an integral part of Douglas's translation and throughout it are woven passages similar to those they cite, if of somewhat smaller compass.

For example, on the night of the Greek onslaught described in book 2 of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas climbs to the top of his father's house and hears:

in segetem velut cum flamma furentibus Austris incidit, aut rapidus montano flumine torrens sternit agros, sternit sata laeta boumque labores praecipitesque trahit silvas; stupet inscius alto accipiens sonitum saxi de vertice pastor

(p. 314, lines 304-8),

which is literally rendered: "even as, when fire falls on a cornfield while south winds are raging, or the rushing torrent from a mountain stream lays low the fields, lays low the glad crops and labours of oxen and drags down forest headlong, spell-bound the bewildered shepherd hears the roar from a rock's lofty peak" (p. 315). But Douglas expands the epic simile into a painting charged with energy and life:

A sownd or sowch I hard thar at the last,
Lyke quhen the be fellon wyndis blast
Is dreyn amyd the flat of cornys rank,
Or quhen the burn on spait hurlys down the bank,
Ower throu a watir brek or spait of flude.
Ryvand vp rede erd as it war wod,
Down dyngand cornys, all the pleuch laubour atanys,
And dryvis on swyftly stokkis, treis and stanys:
The sylly hyrd, seand this grysly syght,
Set on a pynnakill of sum cragis hycht
Al abasit, nocht knawand quhat this may meyn,
Wondris of the sownd and ferly at he has seyn.

(II, 81, lines 11-22)

Or again, when the Greeks burst into Priam's palace:
non sic, aggeribus ruptis cum spumeus amnis
exiit oppositasque evicit gurgite moles,
fertur in arva furens cumulo camposque per omnis
cum stabulis armenta trahit
(p. 326, lines 496-9),

Literal, "Not with such fury, when a foaming river, bursting
its barriers, has overflowed and with its torrent overwhelmed
the resisting banks, does it rush furiously upon the fields in
a mass and over all the plains sweep herds and folds" (p. 327),
becomes another painting:

Not sa fersly the fomy ryver or flude
Brekkis our the bankis on spait quhen it is wode,
And, with hys brusch and fard of watir brown,
The dykis and the schoris bettis doun,
Ourspredand croftis and flattis with his spait,
Our al the feildis that thai may row a bayt,
Qhili howsys and the flokkis flyttis away,
The corn grangis and standard stakkis of hay.
(II, 90, lines 101-8)

Not only do Pearsall and Salter focus their discussion of
Douglas's descriptive powers upon his prologues; they are con-
cerned exclusively with landscape. Yet the most original
literary contribution of the _Eneados_ lies, I believe, in its
evocation of the sea; and there are within the body of the
translation many seascapes as detailed and panoramic, as
charged with sensuous response to detail, organized with the
same visualizing power, characterized by the same quality,
sweep and energy of perception as are the landscapes they
praise so highly.

Consider for example a painting of a sheltered harbor, a
port, where Douglas unlike Vergil notes the shape of the bay,
the useful effect of the protecting reef, like a jetty, and the
resultant calm of the harbor, protected from wind or wave:

...quham the est fludis hess,
In maner of a bow, maid bowle or bay,
With rochys set forgane the streym ful stay,
To brek the salt fame of the seys stour.
On athir hand, als hie as ony towr,
The byg hewis strekis furth lyke a wall;
Within the hawyn goith lown, but wynd or wall.
(II, 137, lines 54-9)13

Or a painting of a sudden squall, which douses the fire in
Aeneas's burning ships, where Vergil sketches out the scene, but Douglas adds the flash of lightning, the roar of the blast, the rumble of thunder, pounding as well as smokyness of the rain, the precise parts of the ship which burn, and the saltiness of the water which quenches the flame:

Scarss this wes sayd, quhen that a blak tempest
Brays but delay, and al the lyft ourkest;
A huge weyt gan down powre and tumbill;
Hillys and valys trymlyt of thundir rummyll;
The drumly schour ȝet furth our al the ayr
Als blak as pyk, in bubbys heir and thar,
Fyllys the schippys, quhil thài flet our the walys;
Wrayngis half brynt bedyit in watir salys;
That al the forss of fyre was slokyt owt,
And from the perrell salf and out of dowt
Was al the navy, outtake four schippys lcest

(II, 230, lines 51-61)\(^6\)

or of a launching, wherein Douglas makes us not only feel and hear the calling wind—\textit{lenis crepitans vocat}—, but see the harbor and the people who stand on the shore drop away to stern:

Syne, quhen we se our tyme to sail maist habill,
The blastis mesit, and the fluidis stabill,
The softe piping wynd callyng to see,
Thar schippis than furth settis our menze:
ȝe mycht haue sene the costis and the strandis
Fillit with portage and pepil tharon standis.
Furth of the havin we salit al onone
The sicht of land and cite sone is gone.

(I, 112, lines 1-8)\(^5\)

Or of sailing on the open sea, when leaving Ortygia, with swift course they

...flaw throu the salt see;
By the iland swepit we onon....
We slyde throu fluidis endlang feil costis fayr.
The noys vpssprang of mony marynar
Byssy at thar wark, to takilling every tow,
Thar feris exorting, with money heys and how,
To speid tham fast towart the realm of Crete,
With thar forfaderis and progenitouris to mete.

(II, 115, lines 109-11, 177-22)\(^6\)
Here the ships of both Vergil and Douglas "fly," but Douglas's moves through the salt sea, "sweeps" past Naxos, and "slides" through the floods along the coast. Sailors of both poets shout; but Douglas gives their sound, "hey" and "how," notes their working the ropes and tackle, describes the nature of the wind, and its effect, and hints at its importance for their journey:

The followand wynd blew strek in our tail,
Quhill finaly arrive we, with bent saill,
Apon the ancyant cost of Curetanys.

(II, 115, lines 123-5)

Although there are many such admirable, expanded scenes in the *Eneados*, it is the pervasiveness of briefer phrases or turns added to Vergil which give Douglas's translation a persistent smack of the sea. He catches the sea in little things--knows how a sailing ship moves, "slides," or cuts, "scherand," or sweeps over, or rolls through the water, or runs before the wind. He knows the unmistakable salty tang of sea air; the look and feel of the "gray fluidis cald / ••• with north wynd scherand the seys" (II, 195, lines 2-3). Knows how sailors cry, "Il1yr hail1 / On burd! a fair wind blawis betwix twa schetis!" (II, 133, lines 192-3). Knows nautical terms and techniques: that the "right" side is the "steirburd" (II, 203, line 6); that you have to pull up the anchor first, and then release the moorings and lower the sail (II, 123, lines 109-10), and must furl sails tightly, "fangis in thar tyght" (II, 137, line 52). That wind and pilot do not so much "call," *vocabat* (p. 366, line 269), a course, a "drive on" it (II, 123, line 114). He knows the sight of a ship riding at anchor as the wind flaps its flags and pennants, when, "the weddir prouokis ws to assay / Our salis agane, for the sowth wynd is blast / Our piggeis and our pynsalis wavit fast" (II, 128, lines 2-4). Knows the ways of sea creatures and of birds--cormorants, "skarthis," the modern "shags," which preen and nod in the sun, "with thar bekis / Forgane the son, glaid­ly thame pron3e and bekis" (II, 201, lines 49-50), and of dolphins swimming away in the pale sea of Egypt or Lybia, "Per­sand the wallys, that plays io1ely" (II, 224, line 90). He knows the squelching of heavy keels smiting down on water: "Sewchquhand salt fame with thar lang kelis blont" (II, 203, line 101). The sound of waves beating on hollow rocks: "...the salt iawpis ythandly smyte / The holl rolkis, maid a sound ful hayss [hoarse]" (II, 239, lines 74-5); "the craggis rowt and 3ell" (II, 131, line 146). And the surge and suck of a heavy surf, for example where Crybidis:
...in hir bowkit bysme, that hellys belch,
The large fludis suppsy thryss in a swelch
And other qhillis spowtis in the ayr agane,
Dryvand the stowr to the starnys, as it war rane,

(II, 131, lines 127-30)

While Scylla:

...lurkand in darn hyddyllis lyis,
Within hir cave, spredand hyr mouth feil syiss
To sowk the schippys amang rowkis onsure.

(II, 131, lines 131-3)

Nearly everyone who has heard of Gawin Douglas knows Ezra Pound's famous, or infamous, assertion: "Douglas's Eneados [is] better than the original," and can only agree with Lewis that such a judgment is "inane."

Except, perhaps in certain nautical passages such as these and many others; for a final example, in the lament of the Trojan women, weary with wandering over the wastes of the sea, seeking the will o' the wisp, Italia. Vergil's passage is condensed and moving:

...'heu! tot vada fessis
et tantum superesse maris!...
septima post Troiae excidium iam vertitur aestas,
cum freta, cum terras omnis, tot in hospita saxa
sideraque emensae ferimur, dum per mare magnum...

(p. 486, lines 615-6, 626-8)

But Douglas, I think, captures the very smell, look, feel of the element, and makes the ominous heaving of the sea a felt presence:

'Allace! behald, samony stremys gray,
And of thir salt fludis sa braid a way
Remanys gyt, fortyl ourslyde and sayll,
By ws wemen irkyt of lang traville....
Lo! sen the fal of Troy and dolorus weir,
Byrunyn is the sevynt symwr and geir,
Sen that samony seys, and alkyn landis,
So huge wilsum rolkis, and schawd sandis
And stormys gret, ourdrewyn and sufferyt haue we,
Lo, thus saland throw out the mekill see,
Quhar that we chayss Itale, that fleys ay,
And we ly warpyt on the wallys gray.

(II, 226, lines 29-32, 53-60)
Here Pound would seem to be on firmer ground. In such a passage the *Eneados* is better than the original; for here it is indeed apparent that, as Pound further contended, to a much greater extent than the inland bred Vergil whose early childhood memories were of the green banks and slow windings of the river Mincio, Gawin Douglas, who spent his youth on the cold, north coasts of Scotland, had heard the sea.

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**NOTES**


6For Lewis's comments, as well as the quotation from Dryden, cf. "On Translating the Aeneid," p. 8.


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11 So that not only Vergil's text but a very literal translation of it may be readily compared to that of Douglas, I have taken all quotations of Vergil from H. Rushton Fairclough, "Aeneid I-VI," Virgil with an English Translation, rev. ed., The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1956). All such quotations will be identified by page and line.

12 For their discussion of Douglas's verbal painting, wherein "All the traditions of late medieval poetic landscape flow together and coalesce, miraculously," cf. Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World (Toronto and Buffalo, 1973), pp. 200-4.

13 Cf. Vergil: portus ab Euroo fluctu, curvatus in arcum; / obiectaealsa spumant aspargine cautes, / ipse latet; gemino demittunt bracchia muro / turriti scropuli..., p. 384, lines 533-6.

14 Cf. Vergil: vix haec ediderat, cum effusis imbribus atra / tempestas sine more furit tonitruque tremescunt / ardua terrarum et campi; ruit aethere toto / turbidus imber aqua densisque nigerrimus Austris, / implenturque super puppes, semusta madescunt / robora, restinctus donec vapor omnis et ommes, / quattuor amissis, servatae a peeste cariniae, p. 492, lines 693-9.


16 Cf. Vergil: linquimus Ortygiae portus pelagoque vola- mus, / ...et crebris legimus freta concita terris. / nauticus exoritur vario certamine clamor; / hortantur socii, 'Cretam proavosque petamus.' / prosequitur surgens a puppi ventus
17 Cf. Vergil: ...laevum implacata Charybdis / obsidet, 
atque imo barathri ter gurgite vastos / sorbet in abruptum 
fluctus rursusque sub auras / erigit alternos, et sidera ver­
berat unda. / at Scyllam caecis cohibet spelenca latebris / 
ora exsertantem et navis in saxa trahentem, p. 376, lines 
420-5.