EXPERIENCING THE AENEID IN ENGLISH


In the preface to his book, Len Krisak states that he aims at offering the readers the sense that they are “reading a true poem in English” (p. xiii). No doubts should remain about the success of that enterprise. Krisak’s Aeneid distinguishes itself by being the work of a poet, a Classicist, and an experienced translator of Latin poetry. The author is the recipient of a long list of literary awards, among which are the Robert Penn Warren Prize, the Richard Wilbur Award, the Robert Frost Prize, and the Able Muse Poetry Book Award. Krisak’s translation of the Aeneid follows in the path of a series of other translations by him of Latin poetry: Horace’s Odes (2006), Virgil’s Eclogues (2010), Catullus (2014), Ovid’s Amores and Ars Amatoria (2014), and Prudentius’ Crown of Martyrs (2019).

Krisak’s translation of the Aeneid is, of course, not an isolated event. The challenge of expressing Virgil’s poetic qualities in English keeps encouraging new translations of the epic, with David Ferry’s (University of Chicago Press, 2017) and Shadi Bartsch’s (Profile Books, 2020) being the most recent translations in English. With his translation of the Aeneid, Krisak enters the long debate over the best way to render the features of Latin epic in English poetry (on which see the survey and discussion by William Dominik, BMCR 2021 [TBP], apropos of a new translation of Silius’ Punica by Augustakis and Bernstein). Translators face an array of problems: rendering poetry based on quantity in a language based on stress; choosing the most adequate metre for an English translation while taking into account the vernacular tradition of epic; coping with the natural concision of Latin by controlling the length of the line in English or opting for free verse; deciding between rhyme and blank verse; respecting the poem’s pace (or not?); and conveying a sense not only of the musicality and flexibility of the verse but also of the richness of its sound and figures of speech. Krisak’s answer to these challenges consists of composing iambic hexameters rhymed in couplets. This is a meter English readers are familiar with (it is also Ferry and Bartsch’s choice), and Krisak expects the rhymed couplets to contribute to the experience of reading a poetic text (p. xii-xiii). With this line-by-line translation, Krisak respects the number of verses in each book of the Aeneid. Thus the English verse regularly accords with the verse structure of the Latin. The text is divided into sections that afford the text a less dense appearance, thereby making it easier and more enjoyable to read. The verse translation achieves no small measure of rhythm and melodiousness, as suggested by this single example: “Here are those who while alive despised their brothers, Defrauded clients, struck their fathers, or their mothers, Or brooded lonely on the wealth they’d made. They are ~/ Not sharing with their kin – the biggest mob by far” (6.608-611).

McDonough’s contribution to the volume with his introduction and notes is commendable. The brief introduction contextualizes Aeneas’ myth while emphasizing the poem’s pivotal relationship with Homer’s epics. A section of “Suggested Further Reading” follows the introduction. The notes are a valuable tool for readers approaching the epic for the first time. Events are situated within the narrative; characters, scenes, and critical interpretations are briefly commented upon; Virgil’s artistry is emphasized; and the reader is constantly made aware of Virgil’s reading of the Greek and Roman poetic traditions, especially Homer. The “Selected Glossary” at the back addresses characters, culture, history, mythology, and selected words and phrases of the translation.

There is one surprising choice—that of the Latin text. Krisak translates H. R. Fairclough’s Latin text of the Loeb edition (1916; revised by G. P. Goold in 1999-2000), when one would expect a more recent text, such as Mynors’ OCT (1969), which is still widely used, or Conte’s Teubner (2009). Krisak’s choice of text, however, in no way diminishes his remarkable achievement: this translation of the Aeneid does “taste” like poetry and is of the highest quality.

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