

The Aeneid By Virgil
Translated by David Ferry
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Review by Dennis Daly

Whether carrying his father and leading his son out of a burning city, navigating his fleet through a tsunami, escaping a Carthaginian seductress, visiting the forbidden realm of Hades, or engaging in mortal combat with a Latin prince, Aeneas, in David Ferry's new and superbly rendered translation of Virgil's Aeneid, conveys the destiny of civilization forward into its ordained future. This epic journey with episodic tragedies, and mythological wonders still captures the imagination of modern readers perplexed by their own earthly impediments and those nasty, ill-deserved thunderbolt strikes from above.

Publius Vergilius Maro (Virgil) wrote The Aeneid for Octavian Caesar Augustus during the last ten years of his life (29-19 BC). He at first ordered his executors to burn the unedited manuscript. Octavian apparently intervened and countermanded that directive. Some critics argue that the book's purpose was to justify Augustan succession and ultimately Pax Romana. Others believe that Virgil turned his work into something much larger, an allegory of man's destiny and independence in the face of intruding forces emanating from a panoply of misanthropic and whimsical divinities. In any case, the narrative seems to take on a life of its own, at times brutally realistic, at other times strangely comforting.

Whereas John Dryden in 1697 provided the coming eighteenth century with a glorious translation of The Aeneid to match that historical era and temperament, Ferry contributes a comparable achievement during this onset of the twenty-first century. Dryden's heroic couplets both expanded and compacted the original text based on his understanding of Virgil's intent. Ferry does much the same thing going with, not fighting the natural flow and intricacies of modern English. Additionally the method Dryden employed bestowed a smoothness and a halting beauty, his couplets neatly completing images and thoughts. Ferry, using loose blank verse with anapests and other feet substituting here and there for iambs, accomplishes much of the same beauty with added speed and elongated elegance. The elongation reminds one of and occasionally flirts with the original hexameter instrument, and the strategic irregularity accommodates itself very well indeed to the modern ear. In Book One Ferry's word choices describing the fierce storm, instigated by Juno, the queen of gods, to obstruct Aeneas' fleet, leaves the reader both breathless and awestruck,



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*... a sudden violent
Burst of wind comes crashing against the sails,
The prow of the ship turns round, the oars are broken,
The ship is broadside to the waves and then
A mountain of water descends upon them all;
Some of the men hang clinging high upon
The high-most of the wave and others see
The very ground beneath the sea revealed
As hissing with sand the giant wave recoils;
Three of the ships are spun by the South Wind onto
A huge rock ridge that hulks up out of the sea
(The name the Italians call it is The Altars);
Three other ships the East Wind runs aground
And carries them into the shallows, a wretched sight,
The sand heaped up around them. Aeneas himself
Saw how a monstrous devouring wave rose up
And struck the stern of the ship the Lycians and
Faithful Orontes rode in...*

Emotions well up and manifest themselves in Book Six when a perplexed and remorseful Aeneas in Hades meets Dido, his temptress and lover, who caused their forbidden dalliance in defiance of fate. Distraught, he questions the circumstances of her suicide. Departures like this from The Aeneid's epic tone and majesty create the emotional depth that captures the reader and makes Virgil all the more compelling. Here's Ferry's splendid rendering of the scene,

*Is it true, what I was told, that you were dead,
And with a sword had brought about your death?
And was it I, alas, who caused it? I
Swear by the stars, and by the upper world,
And by whatever here below is holy,
I left your shores unwillingly. It was
The gods' commands which have brought me now down through
The shadows to these desolate wasted places,
In the profound abysmal dark; it was
The gods who drove me, and I could not know
That when I left I left behind a grief
So devastated. Stay. Who is it you
Are fleeing from? Do not withdraw from sight.
This is the last I am allowed by fate
To say to you." Weeping he tried with these,
His words, to appease the rage in her fiery eyes.*

Notice the meeting of pathos and white-hot ire at the end of the selection. As a suicide Dido was condemned to live in the past, forever enshrining her tragedy. Seems a bit unjust! And, paradoxically, quite suitable for our age.

During his quest Aeneas loses quite a lot: his wife left in Troy's flames, Dido, his lover, succumbing to suicide, and Pallas, the Arcadian boy he

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was guardian to, felled by the prince of his enemies. All sacrificed to destiny. Along the way circumstances seem to alter "pious" Aeneas' psychological makeup. In his climactic battle with Turnus, his Latin antagonist, Aeneas shuns the mercy asked for by his remorseful rival and lets vengeance rule the day, perhaps even prospectively setting the precedent that influenced the history of Rome with strife and civil war down to Octavian's time. After some hesitation the deal is sealed when Aeneas glimpses Pallas' sword belt on Turnus. Ferry feels the building wrath and translates part of Virgil's last scene this way,

*When Aeneas saw it on Turnus' shoulder, shining
Memorial of the dolorous story, and
Of his own grief, the terrible savage rage
Rose up in him, and he said to Turnus, "Did you
Think that you could get away with this,
Wearing this trophy of what you did to him?
It is Pallas who makes you his sacrifice. It is Pallas
Who drives this home!" And saying this he ripped
Open the breast of Turnus and Turnus' bones
Went chilled and slack...*

No hyperbole needed in praise of David Ferry's translation of the Aeneid. Truly astonishing.