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*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*



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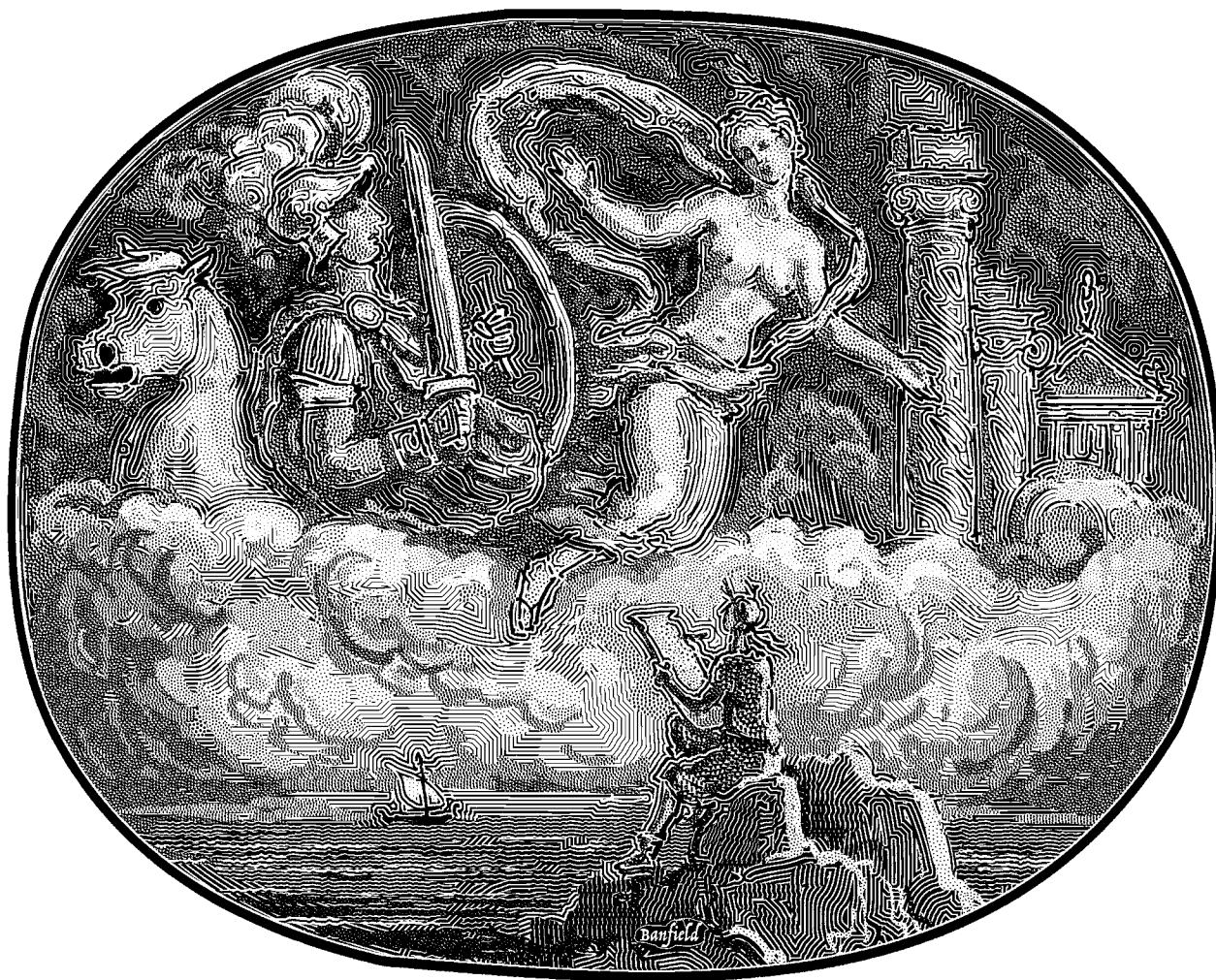
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Book Review by A.M. Juster

## POWER AND RHYTHM

*The Aeneid*, by Virgil, translated by David Ferry.  
The University of Chicago Press, 432 pages, \$35



EPIC POETRY COMMUNICATES AND RE-  
inforces histories that reinforce core  
cultural and national identities. Once  
those histories embed themselves in a culture,  
it is impossible for poets to produce new tales  
of similar scope and majesty. Despite admir-  
able efforts by Lucan, Corippus, and other tal-  
ented poets, the wreckage of failed epic poems  
litters the Latin poetry landscape.

The influence of Virgil's *Aeneid* outlived  
the society it celebrated. With an acrobatic  
set of intellectual contortions, Church Fa-  
thers embraced Virgil as a proto-Christian—  
some even saw Christ's birth predicted in  
Virgil's *Eclogues*. Late Antique and medieval  
poetry relied heavily on Virgil, and in par-  
ticular the *Aeneid*, for their imagery and use  
of language. Dante and John Milton could

not have written their greatest poetry with-  
out the *Aeneid*.

With modernist poets' elitism, poverty of  
language, and short attention spans, there  
seems almost no possibility that we will see  
a revival of epic verse. Missing the solaces of  
the genre, the public looks now to fantasy  
fiction—from J.R.R. Tolkien to J.K. Row-  
ling and George R.R. Martin—for the quasi-  
religious mythologies once the province of  
epics.

The public's unfulfilled desires may ex-  
plain the proliferation of new translations of  
great epics. Recent decades have seen mul-  
tiple translations of Homer and Virgil, many  
of which wander bombastically from the lan-  
guage of the originals. A.N. Wilson quite  
properly skewered Frederick Ahl's translation

of the *Aeneid* (2007) by singling out this line  
for its inaccuracy and inelegance:

Cloven-footed quadruped clatter kicks  
clumps, quivers plain at a gallop.  
(XI.875)

Compare this densely alliterative and incoher-  
ent line with G.P. Goold's "literal" translation  
for Harvard University Press:

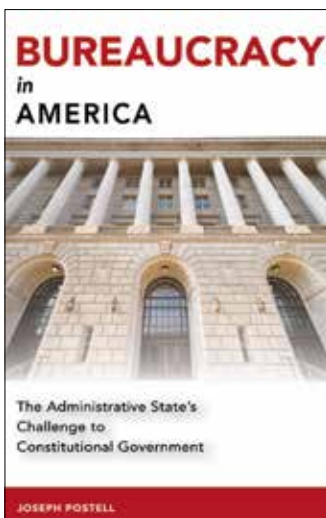
And in their galloping course the horse  
hoof shakes the crumbling plain.

Robert Fagles's 2006 translation is less tes-  
tosterone-drenched and more accurate than  
Ahl's, but it doesn't deserve the lavish praise  
it has received. Barry Powell's 2015 free verse

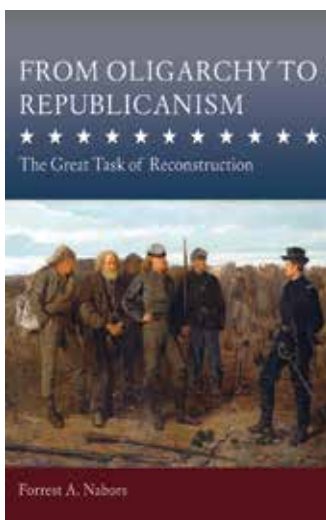




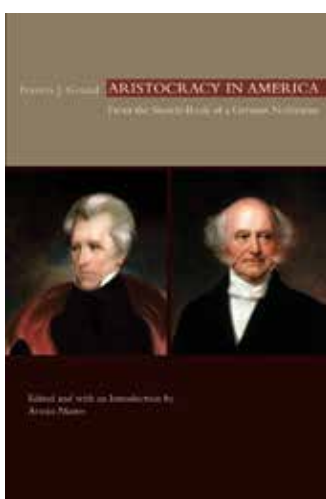
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version has been almost entirely, and rightly, ignored.

In the 1990s many New Formalists, particularly Charles Martin, Rachel Hadas, and X.J. Kennedy, had considerable success translating Greek and Latin poetry, but they steered clear of epics. In 2008, however, poet-scholar Sarah Ruden translated the *Aeneid* into elegant iambic pentameter, becoming the first woman ever to translate the poem. Faber & Faber posthumously published Seamus Heaney's translation of Book VI of the *Aeneid* in 2016 (reviewed by Dana Gioia in the Spring 2017 CRB). It is beautiful in the tradition of John Dryden's famous version in heroic couplets, but Heaney himself admitted that he had "things other than literal accuracy on his mind."

**R**UDEN'S TRANSLATION RECEIVED WIDESPREAD praise among reviewers, but her work has remained controversial among certain classicists; I once watched Ahl and a prominent classical scholar shout her down during a panel discussion when she defended her use of iambic pentameter. The shouters largely recycled legitimate objections to Robert Fitzgerald's still-popular 1983 blank verse translation, which left out significant content and nuances to achieve its elegance.

One cannot extend such criticism to Ruden, however, who has a Ph.D in classical philology from Harvard and a focus on detail lacking in Fitzgerald. If we return to the line butchered by Ahl, we can see the merits of Ruden's version:

The speeding hoofbeats shook that soft-  
earthed plain.

Her rendering of "hoofbeats" in the plural is clearly the correct translation, and her choice of "soft-earthed" for *putrem* is far superior to Goold's "crumbling." More importantly, Ruden's line is quietly powerful in a way that reflects the tone of the original text.

In his new translation of the *Aeneid*, David Ferry, who has previously translated Virgil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics*, renders this same line skillfully:

Their galloping hooves are shaking the  
dust of the plain.

The three anapests—two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed—in Ferry's line are suggestive of the horses' "galloping," and for me "the dust" is a clear improvement upon Ruden's "soft-earthed."

Ferry's translation reflects assumptions somewhere between those of Fagles and Ruden.

Ferry is not a classicist but a retired English professor revered for his thoughtfulness and humility—rare traits among prominent poets. His early poetry in the 1950s was formal in the style of Richard Wilbur and Anthony Hecht. Like Adrienne Rich, Louis Simpson, Donald Hall, and Robert Bly, he moved away from his early assumptions about craft, but he did not move as far, and never embraced their middle-aged bile toward formal poetry.

Over time Ferry adopted a unique prosody that reflected his literary temperament. He loosened his iambic pentameter by allowing himself an anapest or two, sometimes even three, in each line, but rarely a trochee (one stressed syllable followed by one unstressed) or dactyl (one stressed, two unstressed) except for the occasional traditional trochaic substitution at the start of a line. The result infused his poetry with music that combined the power of blank verse with the flexibility of a conversational free verse line:

Saturday afternoon. The barracks is al-  
most empty.  
The soldiers are almost all on overnight  
pass.  
There is only me, writing this letter to  
you,  
And one other soldier, down at the end  
of the room,  
And a spider, that hangs by the thread  
of his guts,  
His tenacious and delicate guts, Swift's  
spider,  
All self-regard, or else all privacy.  
("The Soldier")

The intimate and meditative first six lines have five feet and 12 to 14 syllables, but in the final line Ferry turns to strict regular iambic pentameter to drive his point home. This poetic strategy works well in Ferry's translations of Virgil's pastoral poetry, and even more effectively in his translations of Horace's *Odes* and *Epistles*, beautifully capturing the Roman poet's wryness and conversational tone.

**F**ERRY'S *AENEID* HAS MANY STRENGTHS. He avoids over-the-top images not fairly located in the text, and sticks close to the prose translations he cites in his introductory comments. He also tries to include everything of significance in the original, avoiding egregious cuts made to improve the aesthetics of a line or the narrative flow. The language and syntax are generally straightforward, and it is easy to imagine using this translation in a classroom. Presum-

ably toward that end, the University of Chicago Press includes a useful “The World of the *Aeneid*” map on the inside covers of the book. Finally, there are sections, particularly in the conversations and Book VI’s trip to the underworld, where Ferry’s talents mesh well with Virgil’s powerful language.

Unfortunately, the work does not consistently live up to the standard Ferry has established for himself over more than six decades of increasingly impressive work. The most surprising shortcoming is that his translation lacks the precise line breaks of his earlier work. More than a hundred times he ends a line with “and”—the weakest word possible. He also ends hundreds of lines by splitting prepositional, adjectival, and verb phrases: to / Compose; in / Her; for / Their; they / Move; with / The; with / a; dear / Mother’s.

There is no obvious reason why these lines should consistently end so awkwardly. Both Ruden and Emily Wilson in her magnificent new *Odyssey* translation (reviewed on page 82) use more traditional line breaks. They also use blank verse more metrically restrictive than Ferry’s *and* maintain line-for-line equivalence, which Ferry doesn’t. With his loosening of traditional iambic pentameter’s rules, he had room to maintain the integrity of lines in ways that would have created a pulse a reader could sense.

Many of his mushy line endings correlate with metrical problems. Some lines have four, even five, anapests:

And the river Euphrates now flowing  
more mildly, subdued; (VIII.959)

What has happened to you, and the  
wound I suffered, for which...  
(X.1138)

On the other hand, the more iambic lines are often short a foot:

This is the vesture Priam wore when he  
Sat in assembly... (VII.323-324)

Here in our waters! Destroy their cap-  
tain and Burn... (VII.569-570)

What makes these lapses doubly frustrating is that sometimes Ferry’s blank verse works extremely well:

The aged king takes up the royal armor  
So long unused by him, and puts it on  
His trembling old man shoulders, and  
girds himself  
With his useless sword, to send himself  
to death... (II.734-737)

**T**HIS TRANSLATION ALSO SUFFERS FROM inconsistency in diction. For every brilliant turn of phrase, such as “in serried ranks” (II.495), there are bouts of “translate”:

They live who are of the Grecians by  
their birth. (III.797)

The war is cruel that Camilla is leading  
her troops to... (XI.669)

The diction problems are broader than the translate. At times Ferry’s word choices are “high” in tone, as when he uses “Aeneadae” (IX.226) instead of “the followers of Aeneas.” On the other hand, bursts of (often awkward) contractions randomly lower the tone of other passages, as do slangy, off-key phrases such as “Call up a meeting” (XI.489).

Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey, invented blank verse and translated Books II and IV of the *Aeneid* into such verse before his execution (for treason) in 1547. Although translation from Latin or Greek dactylic hexameter into blank verse requires compression, that compression often improves the quality of the resulting poetry. Both Sarah Ruden in her *Aeneid* translation and Emily Wilson in her *Odyssey* translation have proven that proposition. Sprawling free verse and loose metrical verse alike have always failed to capture the grandeur of epic poetry. Blank verse can provide translations of these great poems with power and rhythm, features necessary to echo the power and rhythm of the original text. David Ferry’s new *Aeneid* translation is a missed opportunity.

*A.M. Juster has published eight books of poetry and translated poetry, including Saint Aldhelm’s Riddles (University of Toronto Press) and The Elegies of Maximianus (University of Pennsylvania Press).*



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