

35. Henry Nettleship, review, *Academy*

November 1875, x, 493-4

Nettleship (1839-93) was a classical scholar; he became Professor of Latin Literature at Oxford in 1878.

The very long quotations have been abbreviated.

Few things are more interesting than to study a poet's translation of a poet (now unhappily a rare phenomenon), and to observe how the translator in reading, as it were, the heart of his brother, breathes a new spirit into his utterances, recasts his work in another mould, and enables men to enjoy it afresh in another aspect and in the feeling of a living inspiration. And it should be added that apart from the general interest which on this ground must attach to Mr. Morris's work, he is entitled to special gratitude for having grappled with a poem which no translator but a poet is likely to handle with sustained success. The *Aeneid* (why *Aeneids* Mr. Morris should explain) is a work so complex in its texture, so full of poetical reserve, of so exquisite a workmanship, and uniting so many elements of epic majesty, romance, pathos, eloquence, that if the air of poetry be wanting to it a translation of Virgil is apt at times to flag, or to lapse into dulness and rhetoric.

The breath of poetry informs the whole work, but this must not be held to imply that Mr. Morris has not taken a strict view of his duties as a translator. He has studied the language of Virgil in all its uncommon and original turns with the care of a scholar; the number of lines in each book is, if we mistake not, accurately reproduced; the periods are ended as Virgil ended them, and his unfinished lines never finished. Mr. Morris's metre, the long ballad verse, sets the whole poem, as it were, to a national and popular music, and thus suggests a main characteristic of the *Aeneid*—a work, by the by, which has been so mercilessly dissected for scholastic purposes and (perhaps partly in consequence) has met with so much unreasonable and piecemeal criticism that it has almost come to be forgotten how genuinely Virgil was accepted, not merely by men of letters, but by the people of Rome,

as the true poetical representative of his time. And this ballad character of the *Aeneid* is not merely suggested by Mr. Morris's metre, but by his constant and most Virgilian choice (sometimes amounting to mannerism) of antiquarian language, as well as by the general liveliness and flavour of his diction. Nor does Mr. Morris ever lose sight of the incomparable grace and beauty of soul that inspired Virgil's verse—into which, indeed, as a few specimens will show immediately, he sometimes reads a new poetical feeling of his own. It may be said, indeed, that the general effect of his work is quite unique, and that, since Dryden, no Englishman has translated Virgil with such insight and sympathy. Dryden has, of course, a power and mastery of his own which enables him at times to deal with Virgil's grander efforts as perhaps no English poet but Milton (had he attempted it) could have done; and it should also be remembered that a freer play was allowed by poets in Dryden's time than in our own to the rhetorical element, which is so strong in Virgil. But in the melodious passages of meditation and enjoyment with which the *Aeneid* abounds Mr. Morris is master of the situation, as the two following specimens will show (vii. 25, viii. 86):—

Now reddened all the sea with rays, and from the heavenly plain
The golden-hued Aurora shone amidst her rosy wain.
Then fell the winds, and every air sank down in utter sleep,
And now the shaven oars must strive amid the sluggish deep;
Therewith Aeneas sees a wood rise from the water's face,
And there it is the Tiber's flood amidst a pleasant place,
With many a whirling eddy swift and yellowing with sand,
Breaks into sea; and diversely above on either hand
The fowl that love the river bank, and haunt the river bed,
Sweetened the air with plenteous song, and through the thicket fled.
So there Aeneas bids his folk shoreward their bows to lay,
And joyfully he entereth in the stream's o'ershadowed way.

[second passage omitted]

Much of the chill dread of the opening of Virgil's *Inferno* is preserved in the following beautiful passage (vi. 268):—

All dim amid the lonely night on through the dusk they went,
On through the empty house of Dis, the land of nought at all,
E'en as beneath the doubtful moon, when niggard light doth fall
Upon some way amid the woods, when God hath hidden heaven,

[quotes next 18 lines]

But it is a pity that a translator who, as a rule, cultivates the most scholarly accuracy should repeat a conventional blunder which mars so much of the beauty of the passage, and render *faucibus Orci* 'the jaws of hell.' If we are not mistaken, *fauces* means not the jaws but the throat, metaphorically (as in a house) any close passage, and here, the narrow entrance to Orcus. The idea of hell as a monster with jaws was as foreign to Virgil as to the whole of the Greek and Roman mythology, in which the imagery of the underworld is mostly drawn from houses and cities. And there is another point here to which it may be of interest to draw attention. Does *consanguineus Leti sopor*¹ mean sleep or lethargy, as has been suggested by an ingenious critic? We incline to think the latter; partly, because sleep has no proper place among the *terribiles visu formae*,² partly, also, because the lines under consideration contain an interesting reminiscence of Lucretius, iii. 459, seqq., where disease, sorrow, grief, fear and lethargy are mentioned together:—

His accedit uti videamus, corpus ut ipsum
Suscipere immanis morbos durumque dolorem,
Sic animum curas acris luctumque metumque

* * * * *

Interdumque gravi lethargo fertur in altum
Aeternumque soporem oculis nutuque cadenti.³

The argument might not be worth pressing were it not that the sixth Aeneid shows other marked traces of Virgil's study of Lucretius' third book.

Let us now try Mr. Morris in another vein, that of invective. The following is his rendering of Dido's great speech (iv. 365):—

Traitor, no goddess brought thee forth, nor Dardanus was first
Of thine ill race, but Caucasus on spiky crags accurst
Begot thee, and Hyrcanian dugs of tigers suckled thee.
Why hide it now, why hold me back, lest greater evil be?

[quotes next 18 lines]

And this of Drances' eloquence (xi. 342):—

A matter dark to none, and which no voice of mine doth need,
Thou counsellest on, sweet king; for all confess in very deed

¹ Sleep, the brother of Death.

² Shapes terrifying to behold.

³ Then follows this, that as the body falls victim to terrible diseases and harsh pain, so the mind falls victim to biting cares, grief and fear . . . Sometimes, in a heavy lethargy, it is carried off into a deep and eternal sleep, when the eyes and head fall nodding.

They wot whereto our fortune drives, but fear their speech doth hide;
Let him give liberty of speech, and sink his windy pride
Because of whose unhappy fate and evil life and will—
Yea, I will speak, despite his threats to smite me and to kill,
So many days of dukes are done, and all the city lies
O'erwhelmed with grief, the while his luck round camps of Troy he tries,
Trusting to flight, and scaring Heaven with clashing of his sword.
One gift, meseems, thou shouldst add, most gracious king and lord,
Unto the many gifts thou biddest bear to the Dardan folk,
Nor bow thyself to violence, nor lie beneath its yoke.

In these passages and in some others of the same character Mr. Morris's genius is, we think, less successful in reproducing the spirit and animation of the original; the English halts where the Latin is a continuous stream of rapid movement. And in one or two places in the last passage something is lost by inaccurate translation. *Unhappy fate* is too modern and vague to be an equivalent for the distinct Roman conception of *auspicium infaustum*, which rather means *unhappy forecasting* or *foresight*, and so *unhappy leadership*; and surely *lumina ducum* does not mean *the days* or *lives of leaders*, but the light which they shed; this, at least, would seem the more poetical idea. We mention these small points only after some consideration, and because we have found Mr. Morris, as a rule, as careful in his renderings as he is scrupulous and delicate in his handling of metre and rhythm. More than once, indeed, we have found that an expression apparently inaccurate was, on second thoughts, justified by a consideration of the whole poetical conditions of the passage.

We conclude these remarks by the expression of a hope that it may be found possible to publish this book in a cheaper form. A translation of such beauty should be accessible to the large number of people whose circumstances have put the original Latin and Greek classics out of their reach, and to whom works of this kind would open a new world of ideas.