"Mistranslations" in Virgil

THE question of Virgil's "borrowings" from earlier poets, whether Greek or Latin, is one that has constantly engaged the attention of his readers. A considerable amount of literature has been written on the subject by scholars of repute, and any fresh attempt to examine a question which is well-nigh exhausted may seem intrepid. Yet there is a sense in which Virgil is inexhaustible, as everyone, I believe, is aware who has at any time attempted to interpret him. In this feeling I find my justification for presuming to make some slight contribution to one aspect of the question.

Commentators on Virgil have usually been scrupulous in pointing out instances where the poet has "mistranslated" his Greek models. The word 'mistranslation' is unfortunate. It suggests, in the first instance, an attitude to Virgil, now happily dead, that he was merely a translator, or, to put it bluntly, a plagiarist, and it evokes a picture of the poet at work with open volumes of Homer, Hesiod, Aratus, Apollonius, Theocritus, and all the rest of them, littering the table around him. No one would seriously maintain that this is how a poet, if by poet we mean a creative artist, sets to work. A much more likely view is that the sensitive mind of the poet has subconsciouly stored up a wealth of impressions derived from all the literature which he has read (Virgil had read widely and intensively) and which has most profoundly affected him. These impressions recollected (perhaps in tranquillity, perhaps not) subtly find their way into his work. Thus T. S. Eliot appears to have carried about in his head a whole encyclopaedia of literary reminiscences. For in his

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83. Article: "More about Dhyāna," *Indian Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XVI (1940) pp 299—305.

84. Maitrī Up. 6· 13.

85. Kauś. Up. 2· 14; 3·3· 8; Muṇḍ. Up. 2· 2· 2.

'Waste Land' one may encounter, to mention only a few of them, Virgil, Ovid, Shakespeare, Dante, St. Augustine, The Scriptures and the Upanishads.

A second suggestion of the word 'mistranslation' is more serious. Mistranslation implies misinterpretation, and to say that Virgil misinterpreted a Greek original is to make of him an indifferent scholar. To this view there are, to begin with, serious *a priori* objections. A study of Virgil's works does on the whole afford conclusive evidence that he was a good scholar. His interest in etymology is a case in point. Even those commentators who accuse him of mistranslation will be found drawing attention, for example, to his use of "inertes" (Eclogue 8. 24) in the sense of 'art-less,' or 'fragilis' (Eclogue 8. 83) in the sense of 'crackling,' or commenting on his use of 'neque' which sometimes (*e.g.* Eclogue 3. 103) is an equivalent of the Greek οὐδὲ = 'not even.' If all the examples were collected of such precision in the use of words they would run into a fair-sized volume, and they have a direct bearing on the question of mistranslation. Is it likely, on general grounds, that a poet who paid such close attention to the meaning and history of words would be guilty of misunderstanding a Greek original?

But if *a priori* arguments are not enough, and if there is still room for doubt, a scrutiny of some of these so-called mistranslations will serve to dispel it—the more so when, as it often happens in Virgil, the mistranslation proves to be an actual felicity of expression. I select for examination two cases which have particularly intrigued me.

1. Eclogue 8. 53ff.

> nunc et ovis ultro fugiat lupus, aurea durae
> mala ferant quercus, narcisso floreat alnus,
> pinguia corticibus sudent electra myricae,
> certent et cycnis ululae, sit Tityrus Orpheus,
> Orpheus in silvis, inter Delphinas Arion
> (incipe Maenalios mecum mea tibia versus)
> omnia vel medium fiat mare . . .

of which the last verse is said to be a mistranslation of a phrase in Theocritus Idyls. 1. 134, which reads Πάντα δ'ἔναλλα γένοιτο meaning 'may all things be turned topsyturvy,' whereas Virgil has 'may all things become sea.' If Virgil mistranslated the Greek, then presumably he took ἔναλλα to mean the same thing as ἐνάλια and understood the Theocritean phrase to mean 'may all things become sea.' Yet in the context in which the phrase occurs in Theocritus the sentiment 'may all things become sea' is to say the least absurd.

'Bear violets now you brambles, you thorns bear violets. Let the lovely narcissus crown the juniper '*let all things become sea*; let the pine yield pears, for Daphnis is dying.'

It is inconceivable that anyone reading this passage in Theocritus would not be struck by the absurdity of the sentiment 'let all things become sea' occurring where it does. How indeed could the pine yield pears if all things became sea ? The reader's first reaction would surely be to re-read the phrase and verify his interpretation of it, and the mystery would soon be cleared. Indeed it is not unlikely that this, or something like it, may have been Virgil's own experience in reading this passage. He probably did at first make the mistake of taking ἔναλλα to mean ἔναλια, but immediately corrected himself. Yet the mistake bore fruit. For Virgil, who knew well the meaning of his Greek model, wrote in his poem '*omnia vel medium fiat mare.*' How this happened it is possible to conjecture. The word ἔναλλα suggested to him the word ἔναλια which closely resembles it in sound,[1] and the sentiment 'let all things become sea,' suggested by that association, lay dormant in his subconscious mind to be woven into the fabric of this passage in the Eclogues. Not the least striking feature about the phrase is that a sentiment which would have been absurd in Theocritus has significance in Virgil, precisely because it is in harmony with its context. The general drift of Damon's lament here would be:

'If Nysa could treat Damon so faithlessly, then anything might happen. The shepherd Tityrus might become the minstrel Orpheus who charmed the forests, or Arion who charmed the dolphins with music, or the whole earth may well become sea' where the transition to the final image is naturally effected by the reference to 'Arion amongst the dolphins' which suggests the sea. That was the point at which, if the colloquialism may be permitted, Virgil's mind clicked, and a suggestion which lay dormant emerged and found expression. The idea of the sea, it should be noted, is continued in the verse that follows :

> . . . vivite silvae.
> praeceps aerii specula de montis in undas
> deferar.

And perhaps also the 'medium' in Virgil's, 'medium fiat mare' picks out and underlines the force of the prefix ἐν— in the word ἔναλια suggested by ἔναλλα.

2. Georgics I. 277 ff.

> . . . quintam fuge ; pallidus Orcus
> Eumenidesque satae : . . .

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1. When this article was ready to go to press I happened on W. Jackson Knight's recent publication *Roman Vergil.* In a casual reference to this passage (on page 202), he suggests an association in Virgil's mind between ἔναλλα and ἐν ἁλί, though he leaves open the possibility of Virgil's having "honestly deceived himself about the Greek." In general however he appears to doubt whether there are 'mistranslations' in Virgil, and much of my trepidation in writing this article has been dispelled at finding so eminent a Virgilian scholar as Jackson Knight taking this line.

Connington and Nettleship note here " wilfully or ignorantly Virgil misinterprets " Hesiod Works and Days 802ff. which runs.

> Πέμπτας δ'ἐξαλέασθαι ἐπεὶ χαλεπαί τε καὶ αἰναί
> ἐν πέμπτῃ γαρ φασιν 'Ερίνυας ἀμφιπολεύειν
> "Ορκον γεινόμενον, τὸν "Ερις τέκε Πήμ' ἐπιόρκοις

Two changes have been made by Virgil in his adaptation of this passage. "Ορκος the Greek god of oaths has become ' Orcus ' the Latin god of death, and the Furies, who in Hesiod attend upon the birth of 'Ορκος, are according to Virgil born themselves together with Orcus on the fifth day.

Ignorance of Hesiod's meaning on Virgil's part is altogether out of the question. The phrase 'τόν "Ερις τέκε πήμ' ἐπιόρκοις would make it clear, if it wasn't already clear, that "Ορκος in Hesiod is the god of oaths and none other. It is equally clear that ' Orcus ' in Virgil is the god of death. There was, to be sure, some doubt amongst the copyists as to whether Virgil wrote ' Orcus ' or ' Horcus,' which would be merely a Latinisation of the Greek word. For the Palatine MS gives ' Horcus ' and the Berne Scholia says " quidam cum aspiratione Horcus legunt." But on the whole the MSS authority for ' Orcus ' is sound, and there are two points in the Virgilian passage which tend to confirm that reading. Firstly Virgil makes no reference to perjurers in connection with Orcus, as Hesiod does in his passage, and secondly Virgil uses the epithet ' pallidus ' of Orcus—an epithet which is usually associated with death.[2] It is true that Celsus, according to Servius, explains ' pallidus ' saying—

" quia iurantes trepidatione pallescunt."

But this is one of those far-fetched explanations at which the ancient commentators were good. There is no justification for such an interpretation, and it is based on the assumption that Virgil was merely translating Hesiod.

Virgil then, we must suppose, meant Orcus the god of death. Again the substitution arose through a similarity in sound between two words "Ορκος and Orcus, and the result is a poetic invention of Virgil's. For Virgil places the birth of Orcus, the god of death, on the fifth day, although there was no tradition we know of to that effect. Nor was the invention without felicity. The god of death has more significance in the Virgilian passage than "Ορκος has in that of Hesiod. In Hesiod it is not clear what exactly is the connection between the sowing of crops and other agricultural work (which Hesiod was talking about) and the birth of "Ορκος. The fifth day was regarded in general

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2. Cf. Horace Odes 1.4.13.
   pallida mors aequo pulsat pede pauperum tabernas
   regumque turris.

as an inauspicious day because Ὄρκος was born then and the Furies were about. But in Virgil there is a much closer connection between the sowing of crops (which Virgil too was talking about) and the birth of Orcus, god of death, and the Furies. The really significant word in the passage is the word 'satae'— literally 'are sown.' It is as though Virgil were saying 'Do not sow on the fifth day, for Death and the Furies are sown then,' or, in other words 'you will be sowing death' or 'all things sown will die.' If it be objected that 'satae' is a perfect tense and should mean not 'are sown' but 'were sown,' it may be countered that the perfect is often used dramatically by Virgil, visualising a future event as something already realised.[3]

No less significant is the second change made by Virgil. The Furies are born with Orcus on the fifth day, while in Hesiod they wait upon the birth of Ὄρκος. The change is a necessary concomitant of the substitution of Orcus for Ὄρκος. The Furies were in Virgil's mind closely associated with Orcus, god of death, not as midwives, but as ministers of vengeance after death. Thus in Aenid 6. 280, at the very entrance to the jaws of Orcus stand the steel chambers of the Furies. As the idea of Hell and punishment go together, so may Orcus and the Furies be thought of as being born together. The effect of the association is to intensify the atmosphere of evil which hangs around the day. It is as though the gates of Hell were opened and all evil let loose upon the world on that day. For, continuing, Virgil tells us that other evil monsters too were born then,

> . . . tum partu Terra nefando
> Coeumque Iapetumque creat saevumque Typhoea
> et coniuratos caelum rescindere fratres.

Once again, there was no tradition to the effect that these monsters were born on the fifth day. But what of that ? Virgil throws them in on top of Orcus and the Furies for good measure. Not content with mounting Ossa on Pelion, he mounts Olympus on Ossa. A further point of detail which is of some interest in the passage is the emphasis Virgil gives by position to the words that evoke suggestions of evil,

> 'pallidus Orcus . . . Eumenides . . . partu Terra nefando
> . . . saevumque Typhoea.'

Whether the process of transformation in these cases is conscious or subconscious it is not possible to determine with certainty. In the two cases I have treated one is tempted to believe that the process was subconscious. There

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3. Cf. Georgics 1.3.74.
> . . . aut illum surgentem vallibus imis
> aeriae fugere grues.

are others, however, where one is almost convinced that the change made by Virgil was deliberate. A good instance occurs in (Eclogue 3. 29ff).

> . . . ego hanc vitulam (ne forte recuses
> bis venit ad mulctram binos alit ubere fetus)
> depono . . .

where again Virgil is supposed to have made a mistake through "slavish imitation" of Theocritus Idyls 1. 25 αἶγα τοι δώσω διδυματοκόν ἐς τρὶς ἀμέλξαι.

Are we to suppose then that Virgil, who shows such close knowledge of animals in the Georgics, and had a farm at Mantua, did not know that, while a 'twin-kidding' goat is a normal phenomenon, a 'twin-suckling' cow is a rare one ? Surely he knew, and it was precisely because it was a rarer phenomenon, and consequently a more precious possession, that his shepherd wagers a 'twin-suckling' cow where Theocritus has a 'twin-kidding' goat. And it was a very young cow at that, which made it all the more precious. It was 'vitula'—a mere calf. Virgil usually means what he says. In fact the parenthesis 'ne forte recuses . . .' derives its significance from the use of the word 'vitulam'—" It looks a calf, but make no mistake about it ; it already has two calves." However, the net result of the change made by Virgil is that what was merely a stock epithet in Theocritus has in his poem become significant.

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