

TRANSLATED BY

DAVID FERRY

THE AENEID

VIRGIL



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The background of the entire cover is a repeating pattern of horizontal, wavy stripes in a vibrant red and a clean white. The stripes have a hand-drawn, organic feel, creating a rhythmic visual texture.

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The Aeneid

TO MY FAMILY
FOR ALL YOUR HELP

PREFACE

Aurora rose, spreading her pitying light,
And with it bringing back to sight the labors
Of sad mortality, what men have done,
And what has been done to them; and what they must do
To mourn. King Tarchon and Father Aeneas, together
Upon the curving shore, caused there to be
Wooden funeral pyres constructed, and to which
The bodies of their dead were brought and placed there,
In accordance with the customs of their countries.
The black pitch smoke of the burning of the bodies
Arose up high and darkened the sky above.
Three times in shining armor the grieving warriors
Circled the burning pyres, three times on horseback,
Ululating, weeping, as they rode.
You could see how teardrops glistened on their armor.
The clamor of their sorrowing voices and
The dolorous clang of trumpets rose together
As they threw into the melancholy fires
Spoils that had been stripped from the Latins, helmets,
And decorated swords, bridles of horses,
And glowing chariot wheels, and with them, also,
Shields and weapons of their own familiar
Comrades, which had failed to keep them alive.
Bodies of beasts were thrown into the fire,
Cattle, and bristle-backed swine, brought from surrounding
Fields to be sacrificed to the god of death.

And all along the shore the soldiers watched
The burning of the bodies of their friends,
And could not be turned away until the dewy
Night changed all the sky and the stars came out.

Over there, where the Latins were, things were
As miserable as this. Innumerable
Scattered funeral pyres; many bodies
Hastily buried in hastily dug-up earth,
And many others, picked up from where they fell
When they were slain, and carried back to the fields
Which they had plowed and tilled before the fighting,
Or back into the city where they came from;
Others were indiscriminately burned,
Unnamed, and so without ceremony or honor.
The light of the burning fires was everywhere.
On the third day when the light of day came back
To show the hapless scene, they leveled out
What was left of the pyres and separated what
Was left of the bones, now cold and among cold ashes,
And covered over the ashes and the bones.

• • •

*Aurora interea miseris mortalibus almam
extulerrat lucem referens opera atque labores.*

This beautiful two-line sentence with which Virgil's Latin introduces this passage from book 11 is definitive. It defines for us how we are to experience the telling of this heartbreaking scene; it is also, I believe, the definitive declaration of how to read the whole continuing enterprise of the poem, the accounting of what men have done and what has been done to them and what they must do to mourn, here and in every episode of the work.

I love the way that opening line in the Latin ends with "almam," which I translate as "pitying," and the line therefore seems almost to

embrace with its pity those sad, those suffering, those miserable mortals; and then after that embracing line, “extulerat” follows; the light is spreading, bringing forth still more about the wretchedness of the scene, bringing back to sight what the scene looks like, exposing it to our eyes in the pitying morning light, into which and against which the black pitch smoke rises and darkens the sky; and it’s by the light of the fires burning the bodies that we see, demanding a pity beyond pity, the tears on their armor, and hear their ululating cries of mourning.

And over where the Latins are, the fire of the burning of the bodies is everywhere. The Trojans and the Latins are paired in their distress, though to be sure there are differences between the two scenes. Doleful, heart-struck as it is, the burning of the bodies of the Trojans and their Arcadian allies is also mournfully glorious, a desolate celebration of Pallas’s deeds. Here young Pallas is sent down to the Underworld with all the spoils his skills and his filial piety, piety owed to his father and to Aeneas as well, have earned. The trumpets’ music and the music of the soldiers’ ululation are sounding their praises; you can see the tears on their armor but the armor is shining; there is ceremony. Over there with the Latins there is almost none, and the pity that’s invoked is even more thoroughgoing in its implacable account of their haplessness. Mortals, alike and different, in the condition of their mortality.

The terms, the vocabularies, in these great two lines—“miseris mortalibus,” “referens,” “opera atque labores”—in the grammar of the great sentence, tell us that what this wretched scene, so marvelously particularized, what the light of the morning and the light of the fires, showed on the particular moment is not just what’s true of these soldiers and these dead bodies, but also instances of what’s true of them, and of mortals, all of us, always. And so I believe these lines, this sentence, constitute a definition of Virgil’s poem and a demonstration of how it goes about its work.

Miseris mortalibus

“Mortals,” meaning “subject to death,” therefore means “creatures,” and therefore as created beings subject to chance, to the fates, to the

favor and disfavor of the gods, and to the condition of not knowing for sure when they are favored by the gods and by which gods and when they are not; subject to winds, to floods, to plagues; and subject also to the rights and wrongs of their own natures, their loves, their kindness, their faithfulness to their fathers, their confusions and forgetfulness, and their own sometimes savage rage and their bloodlust. And so I translated “*miseris mortalibus*” as (taking the phrase from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 65) “sad mortality,” the name of the condition itself, of being subject to death, to the partialities and contingencies and constraints of being human.

Opera atque labores

It is no accident that this phrase deliberately recalls the Latin title of Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (*Opera et dies*), or that Virgil says in his *Georgics* that he’s singing the songs of Hesiod in Roman towns, and is doing so again in the *Aeneid*, or that both poems narrate the dogged pursuit of their mortal aims within the contingent partializing powers and limitations of being mortal. Jupiter saw to it that the way should not be easy, and he did so, so that mortal men would develop arts to make their way with *Labor omnia vincit*: “And everything was toil, relentless toil, urged on by need.” David West excellently translates “*opera atque labores*” as “their toils and sufferings,” and I’ve translated it as “what men have done, and what has been done to them.” The relentless toil and sufferings are definitive of the condition of being mortal, in the *Georgics* as in the *Aeneid*.

Referens

The light is at sunrise, bringing back not only this terrible scene but also, not “ferens” but “referens,” bringing *back* to mind the stories that have been told before: for example, that other, so like this one, in book 23 of the *Iliad*, the burning of the body of Achilles’s Patroclus, with the bodies of the twelve captive Trojan young men, and the beasts offered up to the god of death. The consequences of the deaths of Patroclus and of Pallas are referentially there to the end of both

poems and play their part in the imponderables of the conclusion. Of course, Virgil's lines and the lines brought back from Patroclus's funeral bring back many other things in both poems, but here they also bring back the crucial lines at the end of book 6 of the *Aeneid*, the lines about young Marcellus, the hope of Rome, in Anchises's prophetic account of Augustus's triumph and its promise of a stable, persisting city; and Marcellus dies a natural death, as if by chance or fate, unchallengingly, unexplainingly showing that he is mortal, that hope is mortal—"Could it have been that you could have broken through / The confines of your unrelenting fate?" So Rome itself is a mortal thing, as was Troy.

And the pitying light brings the mortal scene back to sight, and doing so it brings back to sight all those other scenes in the *Aeneid*, and, referentially, all those in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which constitute the telling of the works and days of mortal men in the condition of their mortality. And I believe we are also meant to hear in "refers" the poem's awareness that the scene is being brought back to the sight of the *reader*, who is in the condition of mortality and knows it, but knows it more vividly in the terms of the great sentence.

ON METER

As in my other translations from the Latin, I have not sought to use a dactylic hexameter instrument. In my view, the forward-propulsive character of English speech favors iambic pentameter, in which iambic events naturally dominate, with anapestic events as naturally occurring. One reason for this is that in English there are often so many articles and frequent prepositional structures; and also because, in English speech and grammar, adjectives normally occur before the noun they modify, and so their relationship is normally iambic or anapestic, even in prose. Iambic pentameter has relatively few trochaic events; dactylic events, almost never.

Iambic pentameter arises most naturally from the characteristics of English grammar and syntax, and so I am using it here. Virgil's dactylic hexameter and iambic pentameter have in common that they have (not by accident) histories of being instruments of heroic writing, and that the internal structure of their metrical lines is capacious and welcoming—though responsive to different rules—to all sorts of expressive individuation. There is room for syntactical manipulation, room for—and a susceptibility to—tonal variation, variations in the degrees of pressure or emphasis on the “weak” syllables in the iambic feet and on the “strong” syllables as well, often subtle, sometimes introspective, while continuing to be regular iambic pentameter events. And at the same time, the amplitude and continuous regularity of the line is suitable to the grandeur of the sovereign rhythm of the whole, the lines in their regularity triumphantly reiterated across the twelve books, as its essential rhythm; and each new individual line is a new metrical event in the exploration of how the

poem is to be heard. What is told in the poem is deeply moving and important, and it is a creation of the way it is told, in the metrical play of its meanings. That's what's true of Virgil's metrical lines; the translator can only hope it can be true of his own.

John Dryden, in his translation of the *Aeneid*, used rhyming couplets, the so-called “heroic couplets.” He did so for the music of the rhyming, but he also provided markers at the ends of the lines to make it clear that a new line was a new metrical event, as the line before it had been, and as the line after it was going to be, each line having its own way of having its own music, its own play of meanings, like and also different from the lines around it, though all of them were regular iambic pentameter. William Wordsworth said that there's always something like a pause after each line in unrhymed verse, marking the fact that a new metrical event is conceding, and another new metrical event is beginning to happen. Readers should hear it this way. As they read the lines, their imagination should hear that this succession of events is going on. Maybe not exactly a pause, but an alerted active awareness that this is happening, as in listening to measured music, all in the play of meanings. As Samuel Johnson says, “All the syllables of each line co-operate together . . . every verse unmingled with another as a distinct system of sounds.”

The black pitch smoke of the burning of the bodies
Arose up high and darkened the sky above.

One sentence, two lines, both iambic pentameter, telling a continuous story; in the first syllable the character (and the content) of the smoke, and the second, third, and fourth syllables are very strongly stressed, with an effect of concentration, perhaps horrified, and certainly pitying, concentration; “black pitch smoke,” “black” and “smoke” off-rhyming, and “pitch” contained within them in their rising column, a dark viscous substance, here perhaps ingredient of the bodies themselves. “The *black pitch smoke*,” strongly concentrated, but in that second foot, “pitch smoke,” it's still iambic, “pitch” being the adjective, “smoke” being its noun. And the last three feet, “of the burning of the bodies,” want us to hear with a kind of insistence