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THE APPRECIATION OF LATIN POETRY

By A. K. CLARKE

THE best Latin poetry loses nearly all its quality in translation and even the beginnings of its appreciation need a little knowledge of Latin. This is not entirely a truism, or universally applicable. Some poetry, like Homer and the Psalter, can be truly though partially apprehended through translations; but the spirit of Latin poetry, deprived of its own embodiment, eludes us. The Italian Camena, however wooingly the great translators approach her, 'flies, plunges deeper in the bowering wood', in that sylvan felicity of sound answering to sound, which links Latin poetry to the senses rather than to the intellect, and refuses to yield up its secret in any language except its own.

This untranslatable quality of Latin poetry is at once its charm and its limitation. There is a sense in which all poetry is untranslatable. But some poetry is of a magnitude which transcends the limitation of language, less by universality of subject-matter than by universality of imagery. Its reality is so great that it cannot be lost in transition from language to language; it speaks of enduring objects in an enduring way, and seems to belong to an existence earlier than the Tower of Babel. Hebrew and Greek poetry are eminently of this order. Even the most faltering translation of Homer pleases, and there is not that baffled sense of 'untranslatability' which accompanies the rendering of Horace or Virgil; though much is lost, something essential is retained. But in translating from Latin, it is the essence which remains uncapturable; however accomplished and sympathetic the translation, it slips away through the most delicate mesh. Greek poetry at its best is of the higher order, being so powerful that no transmutation can rob it of its special energy and life.

This creative atmosphere is exactly what Latin poetry usually lacks, and it is the more important that its special genius and charm should be clearly presented to those who will read only a little Latin. At present the difficulties of language, and the disproportionate amount of disconnected reading, help to make their attitude to Latin poetry somewhat detached. They feel that it lacks the vision and depth of poetry; it has no 'magic casements', none of those moments of illumination and awakening which real poetry gives. Something is needed which will overcome this detachment, and bring its readers into a more living and lasting relationship with the beauty and quality of Latin.

There is justice in this inarticulate sense of something lacking, and the case against Latin poetry has been weightily urged by many lovers of literature. Finish of expression is the best, they say, that Latin poetry gives us. The ideas are few, or none: a few commonplaces from the Greek philosophers and a few inherited maxims are the whole of its intellectual content. The great Latin epic is a frigid imitation of Homer, with some romantic passages which borrow the colouring and glow of an Alexandrian poet, and with a patriotic motive which degenerates into gross flattery of the prince. The Odes of Horace, too, are imitations, successful where the note is pitched low enough, but turgid wherever the theme attempts to rise, and always, beneath the exquisite expression, commonplace. Catullus and Lucretius are the only Latin poets of genius, but Catullus wrote very little that was fully original or characteristic, and wasted time in imitation of Greek poetry in its most artificial phase, while Lucretius chose a subject which was stubbornly insusceptible of poetry, except in its digressions. Dr. Johnson's dismissal of Lycidas will serve, on the whole, for the Latin poets. 'There is no nature, for there is no truth; there is no art, for there is nothing new. Nobody could fancy that he had read these works with pleasure, had he not known their authors.'

These criticisms have long since been faced and answered on their own ground, and the original contribution of Roman poetry has been found in the deeply felt conceptions of *gravitas*

and *pietas*, which suffuse and reinterpret everything that they borrow. Modern appreciation of Horace and Virgil was rightly orientated by Henry Nettleship, and has moved forward ever since; the conception of them as mere flatterers and court-poets has been abandoned, as we have learnt to realize their whole-hearted identification with the constructive forces of their age. To undervalue these facts is to misread history. Yet there is perhaps even a tendency to overvalue them; and the criticisms of Latin poetry will only be effectively met by a deeper appreciation of its aesthetic qualities. Latin poetry should be presented to its readers as poetry; and like any other poetry it is as an aspect of beauty that it must finally be valued and judged.

'In the Latin art of language, mere sonority plays a part far larger than usual.' Verrall here fixed the right starting-point for appreciation. Latin poetry needs to be studied from the very beginning with this in mind. The road to its appreciation, especially for those who will read only a little, and that little slowly, is through understanding the musical qualities in which Latin excels; and it is possible to see how this melodic character develops, and comes to be more subtly and unobtrusively used.

At present the writer most studied in short passages is Ovid, who is much the thinnest of the Latin poets in melodic content; and though he has great merits, and the brilliant finish of some of his descriptions is well worth study, he is not a fully characteristic Latin writer. For melody, and the characteristic movement of Latin poetry, short passages of Ennius, Lucretius, Catullus are far better, and certainly not more difficult; and an early study of these gives coherence and meaning, as the sense of development is awakened from the start; the first reading of Virgil comes in its natural place and setting. It is doubtless right that Virgil should be the first poet to be read at any length. Yet there is room for the study of one Latin poem which is too much neglected. The *Peleus and Thetis* of Catullus is neither very long nor very difficult; it is full of vivid and quickly appreciated pictures, and, crude in some respects as is Catullus' hexameter, it shows the possibilities of Latin

very clearly, and is a good preparation for the study of the more delicate and proportioned treatment of metre by Virgil. Meantime it has many beautiful passages which can be appreciated in and for themselves, and which show the beginning of the verse-paragraph as early as Catullus.

> Quem procul ex alga maestis Minois ocellis,
> saxea ut effigies Bacchantis, prospicit, eheu,
> prospicit, et magnis curarum fluctuat undis,
> non flavo retinens subtilem vertice mitram,
> non contecta levi velatum pectus amictu,
> non tereti strophio lactentes vincta papillas,
> omnia quae toto delapsa e corpore passim
> ipsius ante pedes fluctus salis adludebant.
> Sed neque tum mitrae, neque tum fluitantis amictus
> illa vicem curans, toto ex te pectore, Theseu,
> toto animo, tota pendebat perdita mente.

This passage has all Catullus' pictorial quality: the sea-beaten shore and the sea-wrack, and the figure of Ariadne gazing seawards, are as clear as in a painting, and indeed remind us, as Catullus often does, of those Italian pictures which themselves seem to convey the feeling of poetry. Musically, the passage is a study in repetitions, and in this Catullus is the true child, not only of his nation, but of his age. One of the great charms of the *Peleus and Thetis* is that we can see in it Latin poetry striding forward to its maturity with the same energy, and with the same technique, as the contemporary prose of Cicero.

This is one of the few poems by a writer of the first rank which can be read as a whole. But in the main Latin poetry will be known in selections only, and for this search the selection needs to be made on a coherent principle, to include all that is possible of what is most characteristic, and if possible to follow a line of historical development.

There is a line of Ennius which would serve for a motto on the title-page of such an Anthology: 'Musae quae pedibus magnum pulsatis Olympum.' That is just what Latin poetry does, especially in the early stages: it 'tramples mighty Olympus' with an echoing and resonant tread, and although the

Muse of Virgil and Horace moves more delicately, it is the same Muse directed by subtler and more experienced minds. A few very familiar examples will illustrate the sound-value of Latin poetry at various stages. There is no better example than the Saturnian epitaph of Naevius:

> Immortales mortales si forent fas flere
> flerent divae Camenae Naevium poetam

where assonance, alliteration, and repetition of words are characteristically enriched and dignified by the beauty of the broad spreading vowel sounds. The passage of Ennius, quoted by Verrall,

> omne sonabat
> arbustum fremitu silvai frondosai

shows the onomatopoeic genius of Latin in an early phase; the same tendency finds deeper, more imaginative expression in Lucretius, and in many beautiful lines of Virgil. The longing gesture of the ghosts in Hades, 'tendebantque manus *ripae ulterioris amore*', is a famous instance: and the Sibyl's words to Aeneas as he lingers sorrowfully with Deiphobus show, with a more unobtrusive beauty, how the natural sound-quality of Latin can be a perfect vehicle of emotion.

> nox ruit, Aenea. Nos flendo ducimus horas.

The first great writer of Latin hexameter verse—*Ennius noster*, as Cicero calls him with legitimate pride—found scope in his Roman subject for the grand and sonorous tendency of Latin. He discovered *experiendo*, and on a large scale, that by this means peace, calm, and dignity could be beautifully rendered; that special effects of onomatopeia could be obtained; and that some serious and significant event or characteristic could be weightily expressed in a very few words. The surviving fragments of Ennius show almost the whole range of these possibilities.

> Iuppiter hic risit, tempestatesque serenae
> riserunt omnes risu Iovis omnipotentis.

(To parallel this we must look to Italian poetry, and the smile of Beatrice in the *Paradiso*.)

The invocation to Romulus is a beautiful passage of pure Latin:

O Romule, Romule die,
qualem te patriae custodem di genuerunt!
O pater, O genitor, O sanguen dis oriundum!
Tu produxisti nos intra luminis oras.

There is almost an air of delighted discovery in

at tuba terribili sonitu taratantara dixit,

a line which must have been a pleasure to write.

Unus homo nobis cunctando restituit rem

is a famous example of compact and dignified expression, but it does not stand alone.

quem nemo potuit ferro superare nec auro

and

moribus antiquis res stat Romana virisque

show the Latin faculty for compressed and powerful generalization which was perhaps at its greatest in Juvenal. Evidently here the Latin genius is finding types of expression appropriate to itself, and the debt of Latin poetry to Ennius is great almost beyond exaggeration, as Virgil realized very well.

The interaction of these natural tendencies in Latin and the great genius of Lucretius would require an essay to itself: but even those who read only a few passages of Lucretius realize that, possibly, here they are approaching the most original genius among Latin writers—original not in his actual thought but in the grandeur with which he thinks it; and that in the Latin language thoughts which are great, simple, and deeply felt, have found a perfect instrument of expression. Lucretius is perhaps more translatable than most Latin poets, because his thought is so simple and grand, but to lose the beautiful music which is its form is a loss which is irreplaceable. To read Lucretius it is essential to learn Latin. It becomes evident at once how his theme—the entire physical universe—is advantaged and heightened by the language. 'The sail-carrying sea and the fruit-bearing earth' are pictures charged with universal

beauty in any language, but they reach us with heightened force and grandeur in Lucretius' line

quae mare navigerum, quae terras frugiferentis.

The great phrase 'extra flammantia moenia mundi' images at once the vast spaces of nothingness, the illimitable void. The four famous lines in which he catalogues the signs of heaven express the stern magnificence of natural forces with really unparalleled intensity and power:

luna, dies, et nox, et noctis signa severa
noctivagaeque faces caeli flammaeque volantes,
nubila, sol, imbres, nix, venti, fulmina, grando,
et rapidi fremitus et murmura magna minarum.

But apart from beauty of sound-combinations Lucretius had an evident love of words in themselves, for their whole significance and associations; an especial devotion to words expressing certain pictures and ideas, particularly those of purity, clearness, limpidity, of brightness and vivid colour. Here he, like Catullus, is Italian; to find a parallel one turns to the early Italian painters, and again to the love for somewhat similar ideas of brilliance and purity, in Dante: and these traits in Lucretius contrast with the comparative undertones of colour and light in Virgil. 'Lucida tela diei'—the lucid arrows of the day—'rosea sol alte lampade lucens'—such phrases spring from Lucretius' own predilection for pure light and colour; and his beautiful description of the loss caused to life by fear is very characteristic:

funditus humanam qui vitam turbat ab imo
omnia suffundens mortis nigrore neque *ullam*
esse *voluptatem liquidam puramque* relinquit.

Lucretius' poetry is thus more intellectual in character than his predecessors', and though his images and ideas are few, simple, and often repeated, there is a real interpenetration of thought, imagery, and sound.

The Lucretian hexameter has a sustained grandeur of movement which cannot be briefly illustrated. But it was left to Virgil's profound musical intuition to draw out of the Latin hexameter the full beauty of which it was capable. Virgil's art

is not at its most characteristic in those striking effects of assonance and alliteration which are so marked in earlier Latin poetry. He uses, and indeed deliberately borrows or imitates them as achieved by his predecessors.

Quadrupedante putrem sonitu quatit ungula campum

goes back to Ennius, as do the occasional monosyllabic endings which he uses with such effect. But his verse is most beautiful, and most his own, when it is least obtrusive in its effects: and it is in long passages rather than isolated lines or phrases that its beauty is best understood: the whole texture of the language is made more delicate by being penetrated through and through with an individual genius which is at once deeply musical and poetic, and with an intensely sensitive and yet balanced experience of life.

The best illustrations of this sustained and quiet music are not the great Virgilian episodes of actions or character, but passages inwrought with the main narrative, like the temptation of Palinurus at the close of the Fifth Book—a passage whose obscured and mitigated harmonies are in remarkable contrast with the passage quoted earlier from Catullus.

Iamque fere mediam caeli Nox umida metam
contigerat, placida laxabant membra quiete
sub remis fusi per dura sedilia nautae:
cum levis aetheriis delapsus Somnus ab astris
aëra dimovit tenebrosum et dispulit umbras,
te, Palinure, petens, tibi somnia tristia portans,
insonti; puppique deus consedit in alta
Phorbanti similis, funditque has ore loquelas:
'Iaside Palinure, ferunt ipsa aequora classem,
aequatae spirant aurae, datur hora quieti.
pone caput, fessosque oculos furare labori.
ipse ego paulisper pro te tua munera inibo.'
cui vix attollens Palinurus lumina fatur:
'mene salis placidi vultum fluctusque quietos
ignorare iubes? mene huic confidere monstro?
Aenean credam (quid enim?) fallacibus auris
et caelo, totiens deceptus fraude sereni?'
talia dicta dabat, clavumque adfixus et haerens
nusquam amittebat oculosque sub astra tenebat.

It is possible to analyse such a passage into its vowel sounds and alliterations, but to do so is dangerous; it may blunt the appreciation of a synthesis of the passage, in which these natural tendencies of Latin are unified and subdued, and there is complete absence of that excessive emphasis which makes earlier Latin poetry tiring, like too strong colours and sounds. But if any one factor causes, more than another, this new delicacy of texture, it is perhaps the variation of word-stress and verse-stress from line to line.

> [1] Iâmque férè médiàm cáelì Nox ûmida mêtam
> còntígerât plácidà laxâbant mêmbra quiête
> sùb rémìs fúsì per dûra sedîlia naûtae.

Their identification in the last two feet is the only fixed element that remains, and this gives exquisite possibilities of variety within the necessary minimum of pattern.[2]

But for many lovers of Latin poetry their appreciation of its technical qualities began with Horace rather than Virgil—with admiration of his tact in word-order, his beautiful use of repetition, and his economical and compressed style. To say that he is not among the great musicians of Latin is not, in his case, depreciation. He is a fine, intellectual writer, and it is the element of design rather than of sound-effects which predominates. Horace has never been given full credit for this architectural quality, by which he pulls together apparently scattered ideas and reflections into a structural whole. To do this he uses every means at his disposal, word-order, repetitions, sound-effects of great emphasis: but they are all kept subordinate to the strong unifying thought, which is suggested rather than expressed. In the second ode of Book III the theme of *virtus* is never formally stated, and the word does not appear till half-way through the ode; but virtue is exhibited in three different aspects, as bravery, as incorruptibility, as perfect loyalty and discretion; inserted among these is a stanza which with a sudden winged sweep lifts the whole poem into a higher

[1] ´ = word-stress, ` = verse-stress, ^ = their identity.

[2] I am indebted to Professor W. F. J. Knight for his detailed study of word and verse stress in Virgil's hexameter.

region, and shows the heavenly character of what virtue truly is; and the mind is unconsciously prepared for the grave condemnation of evil as ultimately self-destructive with which the poem ends.

The great fourth ode, *Descende caelo*, shows the same method on a larger scale. There is again no explicit statement of the theme, which is the ultimate victory of wisdom and all the forces of sweetness and light which accompany it. These are typified at first by the Muses, while the 'first movement' of the poem, the personal dedication of Horace to poetry, opens out gently to a wider application; then by the familiar opposition of the Olympic gods to the Titans, with especial emphasis on Pallas; finally by the single figure of Apollo. The conceptions of intellectual light and sweetness, first typified in the Muses, are here summed up in five lines which concentrate the whole theme in a single widely associated image of grace and power:

> Nunquam humeris positurus arcum
> qui rore puro Castaliae lavit
> crines solutos, qui Lyciae tenet
> dumeta natalemque silvam
> Delius et Patareus Apollo.

The last line is the logical centre of the poem, and its latinized Greek is a beautiful crescendo of sound.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to show the diminished musical quality of Silver Latin and its recovery in the later Empire. There is a very curious secondary revival, in the imitative and highly intuitive genius of Claudian. But the genuine restoration of musical significance in Latin came, as was to be expected, through the spontaneous growth of Christian Latin poetry. The same quality of beautiful vowel sound which was found in Naevius, Ennius, or Catullus becomes once more the predominant factor. Whether in the majestic rhythms of the *Te Deum*, or in the great hymns written to popular metres, melody is once again the fundamental characteristic, and irrecoverable even in the best translation: and Latin poetry becomes a great instrument of expression for a whole new world of vision and understanding.