

Review of *C. S. Lewis's Lost Aeneid: Arms and the Exile*, edited by A. T. Reyes. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. 9780300167177, xxiv + 208 pages, \$27.50

The single greatest regret of a reader of C. S. Lewis' verse translation of Vergil's *Aeneid* must be that Lewis did not finish the work. The incomplete translation as we have it was never really lost,<sup>1</sup> but it is possible that Lewis had translated more, which did not escape the posthumous bonfire of his papers, as related in the book's Introduction. Surviving is the whole of Book I (758 English lines from 756 in Latin), much of Book II (516 English lines, out of a total of 801 in Latin), and some of Book VI (253 English lines out of 901 in Latin). Lewis quoted the *Aeneid* widely in his writings, and when he did so it was in his own translation; thus, fragments are preserved here and there in *Preface to Paradise Lost*, *Studies in Words*, etc. These have the same poetic form as the longer stretches, which could suggest that they were remnants of a much more complete translation than we now have. Equally, since Lewis had given much thought to the form best suited to render the *Aeneid* into English, he may simply have used the same metrical and rhyming structure for short passages translated for specific purposes as for his incomplete longer attempt.

The work under review collects all the available lines of Lewis' translation, and publishes them with facing Latin. The presentation of the book by Yale University Press is to a high standard, beginning with the jacket illustration taken from a Late Antique illustrated *Aeneid*, and continuing through the text, the maps, a glossary, and the index of names. Nor are these simply aesthetic inclusions: The cover art emphasises Lewis' self-situation in continuity with the

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<sup>1</sup> We owe the title of *C. S. Lewis's Lost Aeneid* to its publisher, but the more suitable subtitle *Arms and the Exile* to its able editor, Dr A. T. Reyes.

ancient and medieval reception of Vergil, and the other material serves to help and encourage those who are meeting the great epic for the first time.

The work benefits from solid introductory matter. Walter Hooper's Foreword (xi-xv) is brief but engaging.<sup>2</sup> The Preface (xvii-xxiii), by D. O. Ross, amounts to an initial review of the translation. Ross compares the version of *Aeneid* I.159-68 produced by Lewis with those of three recent and well-regarded translators (Mandelbaum, Lombardo, and Fagles). Lewis' rendering of Vergil's set-piece description of a long bay is superior, Ross finds, on multiple grounds: It is more poetic, it captures elements of the atmosphere ignored by most of the other translators, and it reproduces a specific analogy of Vergil's which all others omit. Indeed, Lewis, in Ross' reading, is the only translator to have represented Vergil's set-piece as a set-piece, as a foreshadowing digression from the main plot.

Finally, in the main Introduction (pp 1-33), the book's editor A. T. Reyes chronicles mention and discussion of the *Aeneid* in Lewis' writings. First, Lewis' allusions to his own ongoing translation in his letters are adduced; it is clear that he gave thought to his *Aeneid* over many years. Subsequently and at greater length, Lewis' various comments on Vergil are collected, and knitted together to make a single interpretative cloth. The *Aeneid* was clearly at the forefront of Lewis' mind in his treatments of poetry, poetic diction, and translation: It is the example for which he reached most readily.

The *Aeneid* was important especially for Lewis' self-presentation as a 'pre-Renaissance' man. The Renaissance is meant to have been a rebirth of the arts and sciences which flourished in the Classical period, and then dwindled and died out in the Dark and Middle Ages. It is well-

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<sup>2</sup>Though his comparison of *The Worm Ouroboros* to the *Aeneid* is rather unflattering to Vergil.

known that Lewis denied that any such Renaissance had taken place; it is less famous that he also rejected the periodization that created a ‘Classical’ age broken off from what followed it in the so-called Middle Ages. For Lewis, the Classical and Medieval periods make up one cultural continuum, from which the so-called Renaissance begins to depart. The Renaissance, and more particularly ‘humanist’ rediscovery of the Classical past was in fact a recasting of Greco-Roman civilization in the humanists’ own image. The false idea of ‘classicism’ thus created dominated European reception of Greco-Roman culture for centuries. Thus, according to Lewis, a translator of the *Aeneid* like Dryden has entirely the wrong goals in mind when he begins work, misshaped as is his conception of his source. Translations such as that of Gavin Douglas in the 16<sup>th</sup> century which proceed in line with the Medieval understanding of the *Aeneid* will capture more the sense of the original poem, since they are in cultural continuity with the original poet. Lewis, as Reyes makes clear, sought to place himself within this tradition: His ‘translation is not perverse, but polemical’ (p29).<sup>3</sup>

What then, of the verses themselves? To convey Vergil’s dactylic hexameter, Lewis has chosen alexandrines<sup>4</sup>, albeit without the customary middle caesura. He thought of this as an uncomplicated line with a definite cadence, imitating Vergil, whose lines students often scan from the end towards the front. Whether this imitation is successful is open to debate. Were the lines to be read with sentential stress, they would quickly become repetitive and comic. The poetry fights against such a reading, notably with Lewis’ favoured device of enjambment: Stress

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<sup>3</sup> The only thing lacking in the Introduction is more information about Vergil himself, and the context of the *Aeneid*’s composition. Since Lewis and his peers were fighting over the legacy of the man and the poem, surely this would not have been committing the oft-condemned error of looking at the man instead of at his work.

<sup>4</sup> In a letter which mentions his proposed translation, he characterizes these as ~ ~ ~ | ~ ~ ~ | ~ ~ ~ (p5). It is unclear what the vertical lines represent; they could be caesurae in the example cited (‘Leading them far, for-wandered, over alien foam’) only if ‘wandered’ is taken as trisyllabic and ‘alien’ as disyllabic, in which case the stresses would not align. It is however not obvious what sense the division into dipodes would have, if this is all that is intended.

and tone must be allocated according to prose patterns. However, even doing so, the reader is confronted with couplets bridging stanzas (as at Book I, lines 11-12, 15-16, 83-84, 157-8), which at times feels very awkward. Still, the very fact that Lewis' *Aeneid* has a fixed rhyme-scheme and a guiding<sup>5</sup> metrical pattern is a great recommendation. That more is 'going on' poetically here than in other modern versions does insistently remind the reader of Vergil's poetical complexity and accomplishment.

Below, a passage chosen almost at random. Venus addresses to Jupiter her complaint that Aeneas' Trojans, the descendents of Teucer, to whom the god has promised a great destiny, are still lost and wandering (Book I.234-41):

*Out of this stem of Teucer, 'twas thyself that swore  
High Roman lords in fullness of the years should spring  
To hold all seas and all lands in their governing.  
Such was thine oath. How, Father, hath thy sentence<sup>6</sup> changed?  
This was my consolation, and this good I ranged  
Against my ills, a recompense for Ilion's fall.  
But still the same adversity hunts them through all  
The world: - how long, oh Lord, must they endure? how long?*

In the above lines, Lewis manages to depict convincingly the dialogue of a pagan goddess with her progenitor, while also carefully evoking Biblical themes<sup>7</sup>. He is loyal to the dialogue of the original text, while also gesturing towards the inevitable comparison that Christian readers (for example in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages) make between the Trojan exiles and the church militant, or the life of Aeneas and the human soul.

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<sup>5</sup> English metre is in general a slippery thing to pin down, but all the same some of Lewis' choices are surprising. Book I, line 12 runs 'Say from what slighted majesty, oh Musa, could come'. This adds up to thirteen syllables, with a difficult to scan cadence; would not all problems have been avoided by using 'Muse' instead of 'Musa', which would surely have been the unmarked form in any case?

<sup>6</sup> One might well inquire why translating *sententia* with 'sentence' is acceptable to Lewis, while Dryden's translation of *refulsit* with 'refulgent' is abhorrent (cf p21).

<sup>7</sup> Not only the evident 'how long?', etc, but also the divine promise of new ruler(s) from a long-lost kingly line.

Sometimes, it seems that the final text of the translation is not an improvement over earlier drafts: For example, I.36 is printed in the main text as ‘So long was fate in labour with the birth of Rome’, when in an earlier letter (p.6), Lewis had offered ‘So mighty was the labour of the birth of Rome’, which is both more poetic and more accurate. Lewis seems as a rule not to attempt *tours-de-force* in translating the famous bits of the *Aeneid*, the *arma virumque cano* or *timeo danaos* lines that everyone can quote.

Lewis is certainly correct that modern poetic resistance to archaism is overstated. Old words and forms have a heightening, suggestive effect which suits poetry well. However, does this mean that there are no rules whatsoever, and any word from any period in English can be inserted into a modern poem? Lewis offers lines like I.16, ‘Carthage of old was builded by the Tyrian hinds’: ‘Hind’ is an archaic word for servant, which in some dialects (eg Scottish) means a subordinate farmer, and in other dialects (in parts of England) a farm steward. It can also mean a rustic, a hick almost. What has any of this to do with Carthage or its noble builders?<sup>8</sup> Far from heightening the poem’s effect, or giving the reader the pleasure of discovering a new word, ‘hind’ sends the reader to his dictionary, and then back to the page shaking his head about a stretched usage to accommodate the rhyme.

Finally, what is there to say about Lewis’ attempt to stand in the line of the pre-humanist reception of the *Aeneid*? It is striking how modern such a project could be: Chaucer’s take on Aeneas’ quest and its collateral damage (famously siding with Dido) is almost Straussian. Does Vergil in fact wish to suggest that the cost of Rome’s foundation (and by extension, the Empire of his day) is not worthwhile? Is his praise of peace in fact a highlighting of its absence? With

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<sup>8</sup> An earlier form of the word, ‘hyne’, could be used simply to mean boy, lad, or even fellow, but hyne is not what we have here, and would be out of place in any event.

his translation incomplete, it is impossible to know how Lewis would have interpreted these questions. The fragments of his translation remain a valuable corrective to other modern versions, and, we may hope, a challenge and impetus to future translators to make their *Aeneids* as poetic and carefully interpretive as Lewis'.

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