

Imperial Tempest

Seamus Heaney responds to Virgil's call.

BY HEATHER TRESELER

Translation, in its etymological roots, is a carrying over, a bearing across. Three years after the death of Seamus Heaney, his translation of Virgil's *Aeneid Book VI* appeared this spring in this slender volume. The book, in its posthumous publication and focus on the underworld, is itself a portage across the River Styx, a retrieval from the land of the dead and the colloquially "dead" language of Virgilian Latin. As in his acclaimed translation of *Beowulf* (2000), an international best-seller, Heaney's take on the heart of this Roman epic performs a literary resurrection of sorts, bringing Virgil's poem—and his own voice—vividly alive.

Heaney infuses the 901 lines at the *Aeneid's* center with his inimitable blend of Hiberno-English, Ulster Scots, and Gaelic, producing a lucid verse story both timely and archetypal. Indeed, *Book VI* is the midpoint of Virgil's epic, its dramatic hinge: Aeneas pauses in his imperial quest to search the underworld for the shade of his father, visit with comrades lost in the cataclysm at Troy, and encounter Dido, the Carthaginian queen, whom he loved but was forced to abandon. Here the Roman hero appears fully human, shaped by his filial, fraternal, and erotic loves: a man distinct from his mythic destiny. This homelier version of Aeneas might have appealed to Heaney in his later decades, hounded as he was by fame and habitually drawn to native places and family.

But *Book VI* is also about the grand cycle of death and rebirth, which piqued Heaney's interest after his father's demise and again, touchingly, after the arrival of his first granddaugh-

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Aeneid Book VI

by Virgil

translated by Seamus Heaney
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ter. Virgil qualifies the finality of death with a pagan paradigm of reincarnation: Fortunate souls, whose "seeds of life are strong sparks out of fire," are allowed to resume a second life in new bodies. Heaney's translation celebrates these spirits' buoyancy as they "go once more / To dwell beneath the sky's dome and start again / To long for the old life of flesh and blood." Though mortality is unavoidable, the well-behaved in Virgil's underworld can eventually leave, freshly laundered by the river Lethe, amnesiac and ready for another go.

Heaney's translation also underscores Virgil's clear-eyed view of empire. Though the poem praised Augustus (and, reportedly, was preserved by him, despite Virgil's death-bed wish that the unrevised *Aeneid* be burned), it is not an apologia for totalitarianism. In the figure of Aeneas, Virgil explores the cost of rule on those who govern as well as on those who submit to supererogatory powers, worldly or divine. In a commentary left tantalizingly incomplete at the time of his death, Heaney noted that "for the contemporary reader, it is the best of books and the worst of books. Best because of its mythopoeic visions, the twilit fetch of its language. ... Worst because of its imperial certitude, its celebration of Rome's manifest destiny."

At key moments, Heaney puts a mute in Virgil's imperial trumpet, one the Roman poet (given his allegiances) may have felt obliged to sound. For instance, when Aeneas' father describes Romans' legacy vis-à-vis their Hellenis-

tic counterparts, the Greeks who "beat bronze into breathing likenesses / ... Argue cases more effectively, and with their compass / Plot the heavens' orbit," Heaney lets the language for Rome fall comparatively flat. Romans, in his translation, are told "To impose peace and justify your sway, / Spare those you conquer, crush those who overbear."

Heaney's lines—particularly his choice of "sway" and "crush"—seem more apt for a lunchroom bully than an empire spanning continents. In his version of Anchises' prophecy, it is as honorable to be an artist, skilled in oratory and sculpture, as it is to be an imperial gunslinger exacting tribute.

Throughout his career, Heaney claimed a place for poetry apart from politics, while recognizing history's influence on a poet's imagination. As the son of a farmer who witnessed civil war and as someone who came of age during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, Heaney's life (and poetic temperament) shared strong parallels with Virgil's own. Indeed, Heaney credited Virgil's *Eclogues* for suggesting "an effective way for a poet to answer whatever the world was hurling at him," and in Virgil's *Aeneid* he found tropes—the search for the ghostly father; the passport of the golden bough; the portents in Venus' doves; and the prophecy-frothing Sibyl—that allowed him to reframe some of his own experiences.

Like centuries of poets before him, Heaney learned what a verse line can convey while on the errands of Virgil's demanding syntax as a schoolboy. In his foreword, he credits Fr. Michael McGlinchey's sixth-form classroom for instilling "an inner literalist who still hunts for the main verb." Indeed, Heaney's oeuvre, from early to late, evinces his training in the narrative compression, symbolic imagery, and portmanteau coinages found in Virgilian Latin, which, like Dante's Italian, educated its readers in their own tongue. Scenes from *Book VI* appear obliquely in several of Heaney's collections and directly in the poem "Route 110" in *The Human Chain* (2010), in which he mimics the descent to the underworld with vignettes patterned after Aeneas' encounters. Reciprocally, the Stygian

marsh in Heaney's translation resembles, in its flora and fauna, its ghosts and voluble artifacts, a peaty bog in Derry.

To sense what Heaney gives back to Virgil as a translator, we need only look at the opening passage. Here, Heaney counterpoints the melancholic mourning of Aeneas, who has lost his beloved helmsman, to the Trojan fleet's near-libidinal joy in claiming *Italia* as their own. In the lines' muscularity, the reader feels the energies of empire.

*In tears as he speaks, Aeneas loosens
out sail
And gives the whole fleet its head, so now
at last
They ride ashore on the waves at
Euboean Cumae.
There they turn round the ships to face
out to sea.
Anchors bite deep, craft are held fast,
curved
Stems cushion on sand, prows frill the
beach.
Now a band of young hotbloods vaults
quickly out
On to the shore of Italia, some after flint
For the seedling fire it hides in its veins.*

In comparison, consider lines from this same passage by Robert Fagles, whose translation of the *Aeneid* has reigned, almost unchallenged, since it appeared in 2006:

*So as he speaks in tears Aeneas gives the
ships free rein
and at last they glide onto Euboean
Cumae's beaches.
Swinging their prows around to face
the sea,
they moor the fleet with the anchors'
biting grip ...*

While Fagles's translation is perfectly serviceable, Heaney's rendering bristles with narrative particularity, each word a tile in a bright mosaic, a note in a discernible melody. "The experiment of poetry," Heaney once observed, "happens when the poem carries you beyond where you could have reasonably expected to go." Heaney's translation thoroughly enlivens the underworld of Virgil's imagination, proving it to have been a defining ancestor of his own, and one that carries its readers pleasingly beyond where we might otherwise expect to go. ♦

BGA

A Spin in Turin

Where food, film, and futurism meet.

BY SARA LODGE

Turin is Italy's Cinderella city. While everybody knows her showy older sisters Rome and Florence, she has the reputation of being chained to the chimney of industry; she was home to the Fiat automobile factory. Yet Turin's allure, like Cinderella's, lies precisely in her mystery. She escapes the majority of guests. Cupped in a steep Alpine valley, her architecture is at times reminiscent of Paris, with its wide, tree-lined boulevards; but the cafes and pastries, the vanilla stucco of the palaces, also recall Vienna. This is Italy, but with a glass slipper of cool mountain air: deep crimson, luxuriant cherries in spring; cream from cows grazed on Alpine pastures; and red wine with a subtle aroma of roses and violets.

I am writing this in Caffè Mulasano, a cabinet of *Belle Époque* glamour. It is tucked away in a corner of Piazza Castello, Turin's main square. There are only eight small circular marble tables, but at this early hour, I am alone with my *cioccolato*, dark and rich as sin and faintly spiked with cinnamon. Gilded vines clamber up the walls and around the ceiling. Huge mirrors reflect dark wood, embossed leather panels, and an art nouveau lamp, in which 16 crocus-shaped shades twine around a coil of gilded stems.

Nearby is Baratti e Milano, a similarly elegant sanctuary for old-world assignations. Order a glass of Prosecco and it will arrive with flirtatious canapés like the hats of miniature *grandes dames*.

Later, I will be meeting Luigi,

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a Torinese friend from university days who is small, shrewd, elegantly dressed, and has a deep vein of black humor, particularly on the topic of corruption in the Italian state. "My friend, this is the true Italian," he once told me. "She will slit your throat and then, yes, she will complain about the bloodstain on her shoe." He has promised to convince me of the superiority of Piedmontese cuisine. It is, he tells me, a culture of understatement. "You're British," he says airily, "you know how it is. If you're feeling poorly, you say 'I'm fine.' If you say 'I'm poorly,' it means you will die tomorrow."

A twitch of mischief hovers around his lips. Restraint, he explains, translates into culinary subtlety. Silken *panna cotta* so delicately tinged with vanilla that it has slipped over your palate before you recognize the flavor. Veal from ancient cattle: Turin's Slow Food movement was one of the first to prize heritage breeds. Luigi's passion for his native cuisine is inspiring. Where he puts the calories is a mystery. I sometimes suspect that, like Dorian Gray, he has a picture in the attic, but it weighs 300 pounds and will someday fall through the ceiling.

Like Luigi, Friedrich Nietzsche spun a nice line in nihilism while thoroughly enjoying his residence in Turin. He was bewitched by the sight of the Alps from the city center. In the winter, the bleached, pink-tinged light makes the city dreamlike and insubstantial, like an out-of-body experience. The older streets are characterized by covered arcades that shelter the pedestrian from rain and confer on the shops a private charm. Many retain their original black and gold frontages. A *salumeria* becomes a theater with black puddings