Virgil, National Identity, and C. H. Sisson's "Descent"

The English poet Charles Hubert Sisson (1914 – 2003) is not an easy person to sympathize with: he was an Englishman—not a Briton, a staunch monarchist, and believed that all royal subjects were *de facto* Anglicans (King, 2014). However, the current flourishing of scholarly interest in Sisson shows that classicists are reconsidering his work (Moul and Talbot, 2023). His translations of Augustan Roman poets, particularly those produced in the 1960s and '70s, deserve careful evaluation because of their high degree of assimilation, which offers rich and politically charged deviations from the Latin. In this talk, I argue that these deviations offer a surprising critique of empire, British identity, and the role of classical literature in one's sense of self.

I will look specifically at Sisson's handling of Virgil's underworld prophecy in *Aeneid* 6, where the ancient poet makes explicit claims about Rome's divinely mandated empire. In 1968, when the sun was setting on the British Empire, Sisson translated *Aeneid* 6 into a 117-line poem he titled "The Descent." I will demonstrate how Sisson produced a translation of Virgil with assimilations that contradict both his conservative political ideology and the broader current of Virgilian receptions at the time.

Virgilian reception among the European intelligentsia from World War I till the late 20th-century was, as Ziolkowski (1993) has effectively argued, one of nationalism. Then, as now, far right governments amassed influence by appealing to a manufactured past. Virgil and the *Aeneid* became tools for building national identities, whether they be fascistic, canonical, or insular Christian nationalisms. C. H. Sisson was part of this environs, and even wrote his translation of

Aeneid 6 in the same year as Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech (whose xenophobic rhetoric is itself a reception of *Aeneid* 6).

However, Sisson's "Descent" recasts Aeneas's *katabasis* not as one of nation-building prophecy, but as a fallacy. Thus, I will show how Sisson paradoxically offers us crucial departures from typical 20th-century right-wing receptions of Virgil. He does this partially out of a rivalry with his more successful contemporaries (such as then-poet laureate Cecil Day-Lewis), but principally out of an inflexible adherence to his own translation theory, in which the social climate of the 1960s alters the *Aeneid*'s *imperium sine fine*.

I will highlight essays published in the poet's lifetime, wherein Sisson outlined his personal approach to translation: it is, he believed, a personal undertaking in which one poet engages with another to bridge what he called "the ultimate impossibility." Translators need to bridge "gaps" of language, culture, and time; rather than translating gaps directly, the poet was to assimilate them. Sisson's "Descent" reveals his belief that there are some "gaps" in the *Aeneid* that can be bridged linguistically, but not culturally. He erases *Aeneid* 6's prophecies and assurances of *imperium*, but their absence is always acknowledged. In the final lines of Sisson's translation, Aeneas's *katabasis* warps into a fruitless quest from England into Wales for an Anchises who does not exist. Sisson's attempts at bridging "gaps" of ancient and modern empire have failed. They are not cognates.

Thus, in "The Descent" we find a rare anti-nationalistic reading of the *Aeneid* by the most unlikely of conservative voices. At this moment in the 2020s, when far-right parties are amassing more power either democratically or through illegitimate attempts, I believe such a reading merits further attention. When appeals to the ancient past continue to be an essential part of the

rhetoric of the rising right across the globe, Sisson's deconstruction of this appropriation, via translation, is as timely as ever.

Bibliography

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