

*Sing a Hymn to
Works and Days*

Peter Fallon, *The Georgics of Virgil*. Gallery Press, €20.00 (hbk),
€13.90 (pbk)

Tough, unsentimental, practical, knowledgeable, affectionate, and above all readable as a novel, Peter Fallon's version of the *Georgics* is a lovely piece of work. Moving at a steady and satisfying clip, it renews the Latin classic (called by the scholars "perhaps the most carefully finished production of Roman literature") in an idiom of remarkable immediacy and concreteness—now plain, now garnished with its specialised knowledge, now intense and lyrical. It is a remarkable accumulation of poetic lines as well-crafted as they are fluent, obeying an iambic beat but letting it play across undulant free verse units that stretch and shorten as the expressive occasion demands. In this work Fallon weds his own best poetic mode—a plain-spokenness tensed and polished by a sensibility that is itself a mix of lyrical awareness and common-sense—to the best instinct of any responsible translator, the instinct to be at once faithful and interesting, to hew close to the letter of the text, but to fill and brighten the lines with an even deeper commitment to an understanding of its spirit.

As poet and as erstwhile (in a small way) sheep farmer of County Meath, it is Fallon's vivid sympathy with his text and its relish of country matters that animates his rendering, allowing him to capture its timeless qualities in a language that seems effortlessly rooted in our own time, as well as allowing this Irish poet to offer a version of Roman Italy that seems entirely credible. Without any of the affectations that might force the body of this ancient text into modishly "contemporary" clothes, his translation can still make us feel that the vineyards and wheat fields and meadows of Tuscany are no more than an ass's or an ox's roar

from the back roads around Oldcastle and Loughcrew.

Composing, we're told, approximately a line a day, Virgil spent seven years writing the *Georgics*, a poetic task commissioned by his (and Horace's) patron, Mæcenas. Into it he poured, among other things, his one-time life as a farmer (his farm had been confiscated—an action that caused him great grief, which he lamented, as the shepherd Melibœus, in the first of his *Eclogues*). And into it he also poured all his genius as a poet. It is at once a loving (domestic) natural history, a farming manual, an agricultural handbook, an evocation of myth, an implicit history of culture and politics. It is a long hymn to the notion of a universe of vital interconnectedness; to the notion (expressed of the bees) that “deum namque ire per omnia...”, the belief that (in Fallon's version) “a god pervades the whole wide world./ sea's expanse and heaven's height,/ whence flocks and herds and men, and all species of savage beast/ derive that fine line of life the second they are born”. It is an epic of the familiar, an unparalleled celebration of local country lore, of landscape and what happens in it, and of those who work in it among its plants and animals. It is the least dull lesson book ever written. It is an imaginative reclamation of a life the poet himself had been exiled from, and it has an exile's rapt (but never simply nostalgic) delight in evocations of the old ways, the country ways, orchestrated by the unfailing, recurrent rhythm of the seasons.

Written during the vicious civil war after Cæsar's murder, Virgil's poem is also a deep political metaphor, instructing its audience in how to manage a state (as well as an estate), with continuous side-glances at the well-managed politics proper to plants and animals. This political analogue is most tellingly spelt out in the remarkable account of the ideal kingdom of the bees, for “They alone share the care of their young and live united in one house,/ and lead lives subject to the majesty of law./ They alone recognize the full worth of home and homeland” (“et patriam solae et certos noverere penatis”). This metaphorical layer cannot be lost on an Irish poet whose own poems often compose a difficult celebration of country life in the presence of political atrocities. Indeed one of the major satisfactions of Fallon's version is the way it manages, without apparent strain, to do rich justice to the holistic texture of Virgil's poem, to its various levels of meaning.

The great early translation of the poem is Dryden's (completed in 1697, it is one of his last works). Reading the Dryden, you

quickly become tuned to his lovely limber heroic couplet, its easy conversational mode:

If little things with great we may compare,
Such are the bees and such their busy care;
Studious of honey, each in his degree,
The youthful swain, the grave experienc'd bee:
That in the field; this, in affairs of state
Employ'd at home, abides within the gate,
To fortify the combs, to build the wall,
To prop the ruins, lest the fabric fall.

Here is an iambic pentameter movement of great fluency and balance, moving between heavily end-stopped lines and the variously tempered enjambments. The formal success of Fallon's version lies, for me, chiefly in how he orchestrates his lines. First he sets up an iambic pentameter base: e.g. "First find a site and station for the bees", "Or with the yelps of whelps across high ground", "Then, his strength recovered, powers restored". He then manages to subvert this formula in subtle ways, keeping a sort of iambic beat, but unbalancing it—usually by lengthening the line—turning it towards the rhythm of speech. Here's a simple example: "Time's flying by, time we'll never know again". In this line, only the repeat of "time" stops it from being iambic pentameter, but the whole feel of the line is entirely altered. On close inspection, I found that each line seemed to have either an iambic pentameter line inside it (e.g. "And don't allow a yew [tree grow] near their abode/ And it was he who felt for Rome that time [that Cæsar fell]", ["So, to begin—] loop rings of wicker loosely round their necks", "Although in that catastrophe the earth itself [and stretches of the sea]") Or, much less common, the line can be just a shortened iambic line: "And veiled his gleaming head in gloom"; or a little run of them— "and what you draw at dusk or dark/ you'll cart away in wickerwork/ when the shepherd goes to town".

This metrical fluency gives the poem, as Englished by Fallon, great rhythmic variety. What's impressive is how that variety lies in the refined skill of the poet's way with the iambic, his use of which he manages to conceal beautifully (working by instinct, I'd say, rather than by design), while at the same time achieving its speed and its perpetual (and stimulating) forward momentum,

which is the exhilarating virtue of Dryden's fluently dazzling version. In formal terms it's Fallon's rhythmic muscularity, along with the freshness and variety of his diction and his way with the idiomatic (mixing revived clichés with a striking feel for the colloquial), that I regard as the great achievement of his translation. Above all, it is this rhythmic mix that allows him to be at once familiar and strange (another difficult ambition, but one the true translator has to be stirred by); allows him, that is, to get across—bring across, in the literal meaning of “translation”—something of the cumulative amplified effect of Virgil's hexameter line (although sacrificing something of its grace and cultivated refinement). At the same time, it keeps us grounded in idiomatic yet audibly “poetic” English by using—no matter in how disguised a way—the verse line most familiar to and agreeable to our anglophone ears. Here are Fallon's lines adapted from the same lines of Virgil (IV, 176-183) as the Dryden passage quoted above:

So, if it's all right to liken little things with great,
an innate love of ownership impels the bees of Cecrops
each through his own responsibility. The elders' cares include
the fortifying of the comb and moulding of intricate houses.

By adhering to Virgil's line-count (IV, 176-79), Fallon offers a plainer version than Dryden's, yet one which has its own robust music—tuned by the underlying iambic pentameter beat.

The translation has many other pleasures I've not touched on. Among these I might mention the translator's Introduction, which, while self-revealing and deeply tuned to the matter and mystery of the original, is a model of that kind of modest understatement to which it is only proper for any translator of a great poem, of great poetry, to confine himself. I'd also remark how well the poem shifts emotional gears—intimately practical one minute, and the next managing the operatically tragic lament of Aristæus over his bees, that leads in turn to the narrative tour-de-force of Orpheus's descent into the underworld and its terrible aftermath, “lamenting lost Eurydice”. In addition, I would if I had space go on about the poet's (Virgil's, first, and then Fallon's) obvious relish for his subjects, as well as his dry humour (probably more Fallon's than Virgil's), by which bees make—yes—“a beeline”; something is done “in jig time;” “Lagean leaves you footless”. And I might also comment upon his confident use of

colloquial locutions (“give it a go”, “his spewling innards roasted on hazelnut skewers”, “leaves his plow plonk in the middle of a field”), which only occasionally upset the ear by seeming either too contemporary (“this cancer did them in”), or out of tune with their surroundings (a “sorority of nymphs” sounds closer to an American college campus than Roman Italy, and it’s hard to imagine anything or anyone in the classical landscape having “rushes of adrenalin”).

But these are quibbles. All in all, this is a very happy translation of a great but not, in our world, widely known poem. What’s particularly satisfying about it is how Fallon has put an Irish stamp on the English of his translation, making his *Georgics* Irish in the inflections of its language, the texture of its landscape and inhabitants, the essentially rural feeling that informs the whole poem. Having recently been reading Patrick Kavanagh’s *The Great Hunger*, and a number of John McGahern’s narratives, I am struck by the way Virgil’s *Georgics*, in Fallon’s bringing over, finds a suitable, adequate and richly revealing dwelling place in the Irish context conjured by their work (most vividly in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, with its renderings of a rural life marked by ceremony and a steady adherence to traditional communal actions). Thanks to the translator, the Latin poem is made to feel quite at home in these chillier northern climes. It seems that Fallon’s own work as a poet was waiting until it hit its mature stride in order to do such justice to the classical text. What we have here is a great poem richly reclaimed, and it is cause for celebration. Like the bees that rise miraculously from the dead heifers at the poem’s conclusion, a translation is always an attempt to find and draw out new life from an old body. Peter Fallon’s *Georgics* is buzzing with this new life.