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Dr. Warren's Death of Virgil and Classical Studies

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The Classical Review

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ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTIONS

DR. WARREN'S DEATH OF VIRGIL AND CLASSICAL STUDIES.

SOME critics may depreciate the literary merit of Dr. Warren's *Death of Virgil*: Walter Savage Landor would have esteemed it highly. But, independently of its merit as poetry, it comes very opportunely just now.¹ For it is an object-lesson of the way in which Greek and Latin Classics must be studied, if they are to keep their place in education.

At this moment in England the air is rife with controversies about education, as if we were awakening to the fact, that the making of the character of the nation is more really momentous than questions of finance; and certainly of all educational questions this particular one is not the least in importance. The old struggle of the fifteenth century in Europe seems to recur in a new shape. Then the renascent literature of Hellas dethroned scholasticism. Now the culture, almost universal in its range, robust and vigorous though versatile and exquisite, which Europe inherits from the most artistic race that ever was,¹ will be lost, unless the literature, which enshrines this Culture, can be studied in such a temper and in such a method as to be made interesting generally. It must be brought into familiar contact with the sympathies of life, as life is lived now. The

¹ All that is finest in Roman art and literature percolates from Greece. Southern Italy to this day is more Greek than Roman.

dead Past must live again before our eyes. The men and women of to-day must find their counterparts, in flesh and blood, (by the touch of nature, which 'makes the world akin,') limned by the unfaltering hand of men, who drank their inspiration from the pellucid skies, the soft airs, the 'old poetic mountains' of Attica. This is what Dr. Warren has done for us in his *Death of Virgil*.

Poetry cannot be transliterated from one language to another. The spirit may be transfused, but not the letter. Swift's lines

'Harley, the nation's great support,
Returning home one day from court,
Espied a parson near Whitehall
Cheapening old authors at a stall, etc.,

are more truly Horace, and Johnson's

'All sciences a fasting Mounseer knows,
And, bid him go to Hell, to Hell he goes—'

is more truly Juvenal's

'omnia novit
'Graeculus escuriens; ad coelum jusseris, ibit'

than the most rigidly exact rendering could be.

The author rightly calls his *Death of Virgil* a 'dramatic narrative,' not a 'drama.' It is more akin to *Comus* or *Samson Agonistes* than to the ordinary stage-play. Action there is hardly any. Yet the interest never flags. The picture of Virgil, as he lay, fever-stricken,

at what is now Brindisi, is life-like; the Tennysonian flow of the blank verse, most difficult though easiest of metres, is graceful and musical; the tone, the sentiment rings true. The reader sees it all and feels it all—the sick-room, the friends standing by, the dying poet himself.

Both as man and poet Virgil is here portrayed justly. Conington put Virgil and Scott together.¹ Both had the same passion for country-life and folk-lore, the same fondness for stringing a sonorous list of place-names together, the same patriotic ardour. Both sing of feats of arms. Here the difference comes in. To the one Marmion's last charge on Flodden Field or the bold moss-trooper

‘on his border foray
Pattering an Ave Mary’

was a joy; to the other all this sort of thing was perfunctory, to please his friend and patron, the Caesar. ‘Let me love streams and woods and I am content without fame.’ If, as Dr. Warren paints him, he was hypercritical about his *Aeneid*, morbidly anxious to add a finishing touch to what was already polished enough, his sensitiveness was for love of his art mainly. He was singularly unambitious, unsordid, unselfish, a ‘white soul,’ as his friend Horace said; and this sheer unworldliness made him, like ‘Noll’ Goldsmith, all the more lovable. This fastidious scrupulosity of the dying poet, though it detracts somewhat from the greatness of the man, makes the whole scene more truly human. It might be Tennyson revising an Idyll again and again in the presence of the Prince Consort and Gladstone.

Even a reader who has never heard of the *Aeneid* realises, how true to nature it all is. The dry bones are scarfed again with flesh and nerve and sinew; the hopes and fears of to-day pulsate in the men of 1900 years ago. One might be reading of Alexander Pope, sick at an inn in Southampton with Bolingbroke near his pillow.

¹Dr. Arnold at Rugby used to compare Virgil's ‘Audiit et Triviae longè lacus’ with the convent bell in *Marmion*.

The stately Romans in their tunics and togas, how modern they become! Horace, for instance,

‘that friend of friends,
The little, plump, shrewd, dapper poet-critic;
The laughing, loving, lyric-satirist,
Of wit and heart, honey and gall compounded’

may be found easily, if one looks for him, at a club in Pall-Mall. The faithful Eros is the literary man's typewriter in this twentieth century. Virgil is ‘poet-laureate.’ He and Horace in their early days were ‘treasury-clerk and briefless barrister.’ The comic incidents of their journey to Brundisium are the ‘clown and pantaloons’ of our Drury Lane. Time and distance are annihilated. Men, women and children all the world over, their almost infinite diversity of idiosyncrasies notwithstanding, are strangely like one another after all.

It is an anachronism to introduce microbes into Virgil's reminiscences of the graveyard at Megara. But the thought is quite in keeping with the environment, when Augustus, anticipating the future glory of his friend, imagines

‘Kings in the crisis of their fortune's fate’

endeavouring, like our Charles I., to find an omen in the ‘Sortes Virgilianae,’ or some famous poet in the far-away British Isles treading in Virgil's footsteps, like our Tennyson, with King Arthur in place of ‘pius Aeneas.’

Many other things, as well as largeness and thoroughness of culture, have to be thrown into the scales when we poise the ‘pros and cons,’ the loss and gain, the advantages and disadvantages of retaining the study of Greek and Latin. To learn these languages is an ‘Open Sesame’ to the romance languages of modern Europe, as well as to the technical language of modern science. What is more vital still, merely as gymnastic, no substitute for this study has yet been found in the way of developing the faculty of observation. Call the niceties of Greek philology, if you will, a mere drill, a treadmill. Even so they have their use. The first thing in learning is ‘to learn how to learn.’ All this, and much besides, will have to go, unless people can be brought to see that

those, who taught and wrote centuries ago, are in close touch with life nowadays. This is what the *Death of Virgil* helps one to realise. It shows vividly the humanising influence of what has been rightly called 'litterae humaniores.' We talk of 'the dead languages.' They are not 'dead.' The teaching of them must be un-pedantic. Too much stress in days past may have been laid on particles and accents. The danger now is of exaggerating the value of the exhumation of paraphernalia, which are merely accessories to the great drama of Life.

The study of Latin and Greek, except for professed students, must be compressed into fewer years by the use of such schoolbooks as Thackeray's *Analecta*. And the prurientes must be got rid of, which are a blot on what is otherwise supremely beautiful. The time for learning is limited; year by year the struggle for existence grows keener; and, deplore it as one may, with too many what is immediate counts for more than what seems far away.

I. GREGORY SMITH.

Horsell, Woking, 1909.

THREE FRAGMENTS OF SAPPHO.

WHEN Herculaneum gives up its treasures we may confidently hope that Sappho's poems will be among them. Meanwhile we owe it to the greatest poetess of the world to make the very best we can of the few fragments of her works that have been recovered in recent times. In all of these torn pieces of papyrus or vellum there is something to be supplied, before, even as fragments, they can be in any sense complete. Often the beginnings of all the lines are torn away, or there is an internal gap to be bridged by conjecture, or the loss of a line at the top or bottom of the page suggests to the reader's mind a lovely sculptured head that has come down to us lacking nose or chin. The proper limits of restoration are, of course, a matter of personal taste. No one would add a new body to the Castellani Head of Aphrodite; but while some would leave the Hermes of Praxiteles with no legs and but one foot, many would prefer him with both legs and both feet. In dealing with these fragments of Sappho's work I have allied myself with the latter school. In two places where the context gives a clue I have not hesitated to 'restore' a whole line, in the hope that in meaning, at any rate, the words come near to what Sappho wrote. Where there are gaps, external or internal, I have tested all suggestions by tracing letters and letter-groups from the extant portions, and in the case of lines lacking their beginning

have sought to make the proposed additions correspond in written length. In the first fragment the length of the internal gaps is itself doubtful. The only means of arriving at an accurate estimate here was to reconstruct the MS in such a way as to correct all twists, rents, and creases of the vellum. This I have done by making tracings of certain portions separately and then piecing them together.

These tests have overthrown many of the earlier suggestions, and while I cannot claim certainty for those I have substituted for them, I feel sure that in most cases we now have the choice of but two or perhaps three possible alternatives.

The first two fragments were first published by Dr. W. Schubart in *Sitzungsberichte d. Königl. Preuss. Akad. d. Wissenschaften*, 1902, i. p. 195, with a facsimile, and have been re-edited in *Berliner Klassikertexte*, v. 2 (1907), where a bibliography will be found. They are written side by side on a piece of vellum which, folded down the middle, formed two not necessarily consecutive leaves of a book. The writing dates from about the 7th century. The first contains a large gap, where however two or perhaps three lines can be restored from extant quotations. Of the second only the beginning of the first stanza, a few letters of the second, and the last word of the last, have been torn away. In both cases I have worked upon new