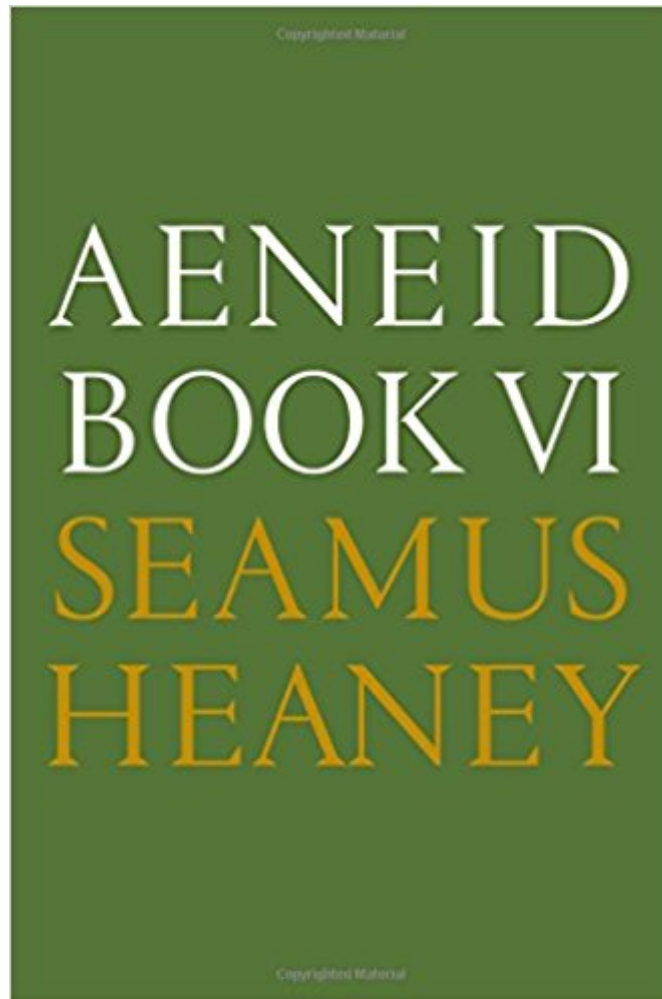


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Aeneid Book VI: A New Verse Translation



Synopsis

A masterpiece from one of the greatest poets of the century! In a momentous publication, Seamus Heaney's translation of Book VI of the Aeneid, Virgil's epic poem composed sometime between 29 and 19 BC, follows the hero, Aeneas, on his descent into the underworld. In *Stepping Stones*, a book of interviews conducted by Dennis O'Driscoll, Heaney acknowledged the significance of the poem to his writing, noting that "there's one Virgilian journey that has indeed been a constant presence, and that is Aeneas's venture into the underworld. The motifs in Book VI have been in my head for years--the golden bough, Charon's barge, the quest to meet the shade of the father." In this new translation, Heaney employs the same deft handling of the original combined with the immediacy of language and sophisticated poetic voice as was on show in his translation of *Beowulf*, a reimagining which, in the words of James Wood, "created something imperishable and great that is stainless--stainless, because its force as poetry makes it untouchable by the claw of literalism: it lives singly, as an English language poem."

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Customer Reviews

Heaney's translation of Aeneid VI is, as he says in the translator's note, "more like a classic homework • than a piece of verse. Don't get me wrong. Heaney was a great original poet and he did provide a very good rendition of Beowulf. But this new work offers very little that sets it apart from other translations. For example, Dryden's version comes closer to Virgil's "heroic" poem. The difference is like that between the King James Version and the newer versions of the bible written in our current "vernacular." It just lacks the "pizzazz." I have to

sympathize with Heaney on this one, though. Latin poems are very hard to render in English. The dactylic rhythms just aren't easily accessible in our language. Latin has a much greater freedom for rhythmic expression. It is a strongly declined language, deriving its grammar from word endings. English grammar depends on position. So English requires a rigid word order, while Latin can sprinkle nouns and adjectives kind of at will through its text without the reader getting lost. This flexibility, and the way Latin adds unstressed syllables (like "que) to its words really enables the dactylic embodiment of the verse. And so you get the famous opening lines of the Aeneid: Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris Italiam, fato profugus, Laviniaque venit Litora | And you hear the martial drumbeats (conveyed by the dactyls) signifying the opening of an epic – all damned hard to get right in English. Should you buy the book and read it, though? I'd say yes. Heaney's version is a breeze to read through and it does allow you to see the work in the context of the whole of western literature. Trips to the underworld are archetypal stories.

(This is the text of my review of Aeneid Book VI, which appeared in the Washington Free Beacon) What is it about a writer's final posthumous work that so haunts us? Perhaps because it offers one last glimpse of mastery, or helps unify the writer's oeuvre, or offers the gift of a parting embrace, we grant such a work special significance. But are we obliged to read such works differently than those that kindled our desire and affection when the writer was living? When the dead speak, should we judge what they say, or simply be grateful that they have spoken? When Seamus Heaney died in 2013, he left behind a Nobel Prize-winning body of lyric poems, essays, and translations. Readers mourned the loss of his consonant-crusted music, his unflinching self-scrutiny, his evocative landscapes, and his deft handling of the religious and political conflict in Northern Ireland. Readers also mourned his geniality: by all accounts, Seamus Heaney was a good man, which makes criticizing his final work, a translation of Virgil's Aeneid Book VI, feel a bit mean-hearted. But the book is not without its flaws, including a tendency to impose the muscular, consonantal style of Heaney's Beowulf upon Virgil's decorous and measured language, and an occasional lack of emotional force. Nor is it without merit: readers who long for Heaney's particular music will find much to cherish. In the end, one is grateful for this last encounter with Heaney, but saddened that we embrace air, not flesh, just as Aeneas fails to grasp the ghost of his father Anchises: "Three times he tried to reach arms round that neck. / Three times the form, reached for in vain, escaped / Like a breeze between his hands, a dream on wings.

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