

**THE GEORGICS AND  
ECLOGUES OF  
VIRGIL: TRANSLATED  
INTO ENGLISH VERSE**

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The Georgics and Eclogues of Virgil: Translated into English Verse by Virgil & Theodore Chickering Williams

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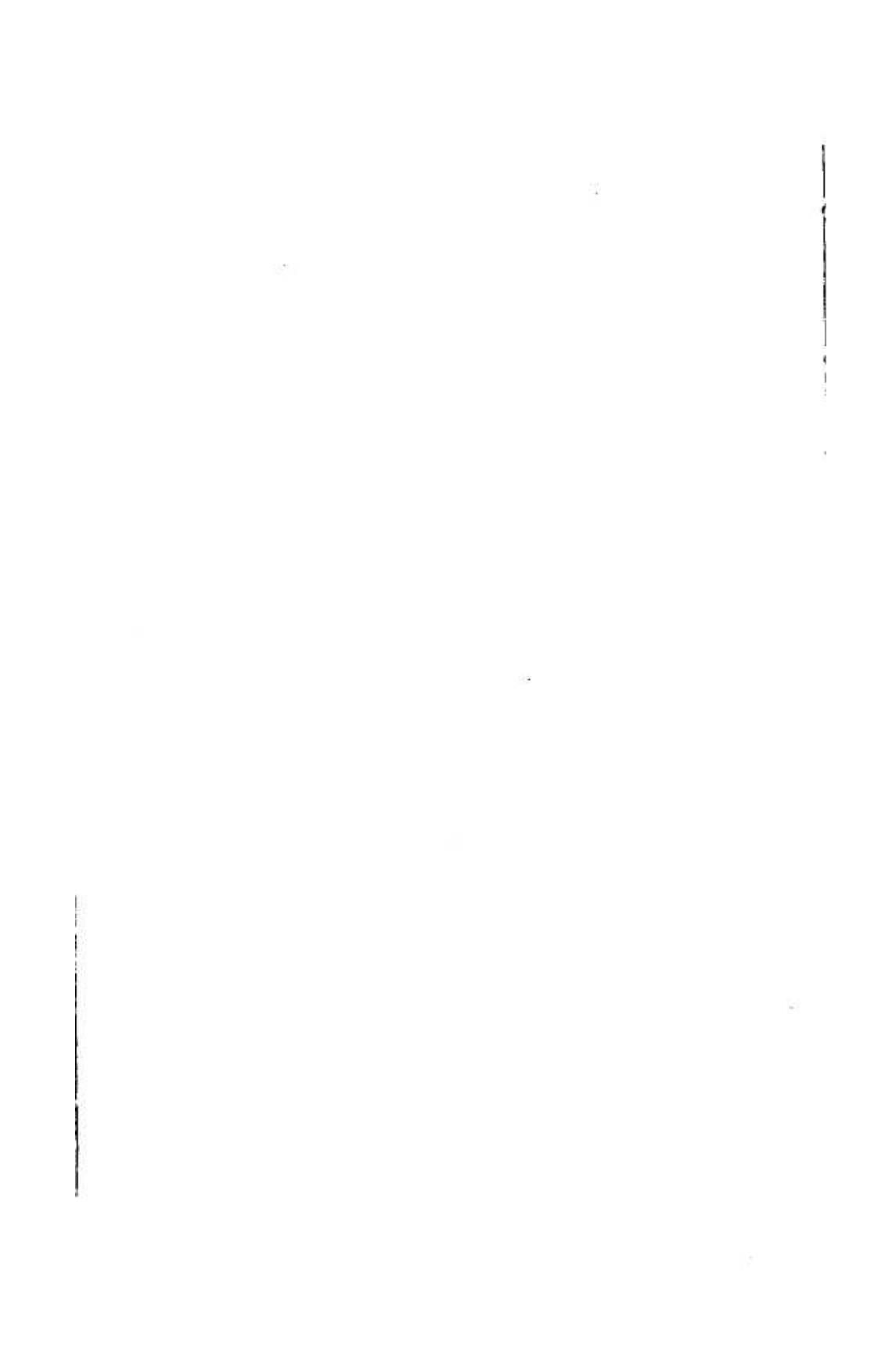
TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH VERSE BY  
**THEODORE CHICKERING WILLIAMS**

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
**GEORGE HERBERT PALMER**



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## INTRODUCTION

A PECULIAR pathos attaches to artistic work interrupted by death. Three weeks before Mr. Williams died he said to me joyfully, "I have reached the end of my *Georgics* and *Eclogues*. Of course all needs revision, and to that I shall at once address myself. But I wrote the last line today." It was too true. He never wrote another. His twenty years' companionship with Virgil was ended.

To this august and elusive poet he was early drawn, perhaps by a certain kinship of nature. In every time of fatigue, anxiety or affliction — and such times befell this eager and joyous spirit by no means rarely — Virgil became his refuge and solace. Turning a few pages of his sensitive Latin into his own hardly less sensitive English freed him from annoyance. In the Virgil classes of his two schools he had opportunity to try the effects of his work on young and groping minds. Accordingly, when in 1907, he published through the Houghton Mifflin Company his version of the *Aeneid*, it was at once acclaimed as an extraordinary performance. In a greater degree than any other translation of Virgil it harmonizes the conflicting claims of poetry and scholarship. One reads it as an English poem, heedless of a constraining original; yet the many shades of that original are reflected here with a fullness and accuracy unequalled even in prose. The



unit of meaning is not the single word, but the word in its connections, the sentence, sometimes the paragraph. The schoolboy may not be able to match words with Virgil, but Virgil employed words to convey a certain significance and beauty; the test of translation, as Williams understood it, is whether the English mind receives that significance and beauty. To reproduce the Latin means of conveying an impression, without conveying the impression itself, was, in Williams' judgment, pedantic folly. As a poet he felt, and could make others feel, the subtle suggestions of poetry, and he had lived so long with Latin that for him it had ceased to be a dead language. He wrote it, spoke it, thought in it. After reading a passage of Virgil, he could hold it in memory and could try renderings of it as he walked the streets. Love, therefore, a passion for beauty, and sympathy with an exalted thinker, have had more to do with shaping his version of the *Aeneid* than grammar or dictionary.

Naturally the piece to which Williams first addressed himself was that which embodies Virgil's maturest mind. When this was fully explored, he turned to study more minutely the stages through which that mind had passed. Fully recognizing the immaturity of the *Georgics* and *Ecloques*, he found them interesting on this very account, and believed others might find them so if he could present them properly. To that endeavor he gave all the time he could command during the last seven years of his life. Could he have had six months

more, all would have been brought to the standards of his own exacting taste.

Receiving his papers, I have merely attempted to set them in order for the press. After correcting the usual copyist's errors, I have chosen among the multitude of alternative readings those which seemed best to accord with Williams' mind, regardless of my own. His and my methods of composition are so unlike that I soon found it useless to attempt such a revision as he himself had planned. The taste of one writer cannot wisely be superposed on that of another. I am no Latinist, and patching such artistry at any one spot involved operations too wide either for my powers or my sense of rightful ownership. I have left the work, therefore, substantially as I found it. Through and through it is his.

Williams' estimate of Virgil is well stated in the preface to the Library edition of his *Aeneid*. In the preface to the Riverside edition he has stated it again. The earlier piece seems to me a more just and illuminating criticism of Virgil's strength and weakness than any of equal length with which I am acquainted. While acknowledging the enormous extent of Virgil's borrowings, he believed them to be shaped by a highly individual personality with a view to ends of its own. His fullest comment on the *Georgics* and *Ecloques*, and his indication of their place in the total scheme of Virgil's life, is best given in one of his unpublished papers. A summary of this will form an appropriate introduction to the present volume.

Virgil learned poetic craftsmanship under Alexandrine tutors, with whom scholarly reproduction of the literature of the past had superseded all desire for original creation. Plagiarism was systematized and honorable. We can best understand such ideals if we recall similar conditions in the Age of Elizabeth. To England the Renaissance came late and was already much more advanced on the Continent. Accordingly the English sonneteers of that day, seeing abundant beauty elsewhere, drew more than half their material from the riches of France and Italy. Still more submissive to foreign influence was Latin poetry in Virgil's time; for the Romans had less poetic impulse than the English, and the inherited beauty stored in Greece was still more overwhelming.

Among the traditional Greco-Roman themes was that of the idealized country. In the country it was thought one might lead the simple life; casting off the complex artificialities of the city, one might there experience elemental pleasures. Almost every age dreams such a dream and immediately proceeds to falsify it. The simplicity of the country is rude; the poet who presents it is tempted to adorn. Life in a cottage easily becomes a masquerade, with its own set of conventions more rigid and artificial than those of the city itself. No form of poetry is so unreal, so manifestly absurd as the finished pastoral. Occasionally it has furnished a good enough opportunity for the practice of youthful pens, as in the case of Spenser, Milton, and Pope.