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## **‘Passion and ordered energy’ [On Gavin Douglas]**

**Alan Riach**

Gavin Douglas (c.1476-1522) was a younger son of the Earl of Angus, head of a prominent family ensuring the poet a privileged upbringing. Like his fellow-poet William Dunbar (c.1459-c.1530), he attended St Andrews University, but unlike Dunbar, he attained high office in the church quite quickly. He was provost of St Giles’s Kirk in Edinburgh’s Royal Mile, and was there at the time of King James IV’s marriage to Margaret Tudor in 1503, for which Dunbar wrote his poem, “The Thistle and the Rose”. Douglas must have known this poem and surely knew Dunbar, sixteen years his senior, another churchman but in a different position in the hierarchy. All Douglas’s poetry was made in Edinburgh at this time, mainly during the reign of James IV. In 1516, during the reign of James V, Douglas was appointed Bishop of Dunkeld and became fully occupied by church, court and political business, diplomatic negotiations and intrigue. He could be outspoken and made enemies as well as friends. His father’s successor, the sixth Earl of Angus (whom Douglas called a “witless fuill”) tainted Douglas in a conflict with the king. Douglas moved to London, fell victim to the plague and died in 1522.

Where Dunbar’s poetry is characteristically energised and dynamic, “ordered energy, not energetic orderliness” in Edwin Morgan’s memorable phrase, and Robert Henryson’s is sustained by a quality of character, compassionate, curious, with a tempered sense of judgement, Douglas’s is typically rich with an unusual vocabulary and a thick texture. He slows you down but the rewards are great. He’s a thoughtful, meditative poet, engaged by ideas of value and worth. “The Palice of Honour” (c.1501) is an introspective meditation on virtue and heroism, remarkable for its valorisation of poetry as a significant calling and music as vital. Douglas identifies musical polyphonic techniques that would be familiar to the great composer Robert Carver (1485-1570): “In modulatioun heard I play and sing / Fauxbourdon, pricksang, descant, counterung, / Cant Organe, figuratioun and gemmel, / On croud, lute, harp, with mony gudlie spring...” Complex rhythms, vocal inter-connections, soaring voices and onward drive are carried to levels of brilliance in Carver’s choral music as in Douglas’s poetry. “Soft relischingis in dulce delivering, / Fractionis divide, at rest, or close compel.” Other short poems, “King Hart” and “Conscience” take similar delight in allegorical meanings and rich linguistic brio.



Douglas's major achievement is his translation of Virgil's *The Aeneid*, which he called *The Eneados*, completed in 1513, just before the battle of Flodden. It's the first vernacular translation of a major classical work, forerunning Arthur Golding's translation of the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid (1567) and Christopher Marlowe's translations of the *Elegies* of Ovid (c.1580s). Douglas translates all twelve books of *The Aeneid* (and the conclusion by the Italian humanist Mapheus Vegius, from 1428) but he also introduces his own descriptions of Scotland and Scotland's landscape and weather into the prologues to each section of the poem, relocating the Virgilian world to his own. According to the OED, *The Eneados* also contains the first use of the word "wow"!

Douglas's translation, like Henryson's *Aesop* in the 1480s or Urquhart's *Rabelais* in the 1650s, is a recreation, a revisioning of the earlier text, a transposition of that text into a different context. The great stories are told anew. And this is how art works. Read the tragic love story of Aeneas and Dido and then listen to the great English composer Henry Purcell's setting of Nahum Tate's "Dido's Lament" from their opera *Dido and Aeneas* (c.1688). It's another kind of transposition. You'll sense the pathos that carries across cultures and time.

This is how Douglas opens the poem: "The battelis and the man I will descruive / Fra Troyis boundis first that fugitive / By fate to Italie come..." Eneas has suffered "grete payne in batteles" and arrives in what we now call Italy, by "force of goddis" to found the city now called Rome.

The excellent translation into modern English in the Penguin edition of *The Aeneid* is by another Scot, David West, and it helps to be familiar with Virgil's poem before immersing yourself in Douglas's version. There's also an immediately accessible modernised Scots version by John Law and Caroline Macafee (Google "eneados john law").

The epic begins with Aeneas and his fleet fleeing from devastated Troy, caught up in a storm and wrecked on the coast of Libya, where Dido, Queen of Carthage, helps them and falls in love with Aeneas. There's a long recollection of the siege of Troy and the six years' travelling that have brought them to Carthage. Then in Book 4, Aeneas, committed to going further, to following his destiny, moves on, leaving Dido to curse him and die heartbroken. Book 5 includes the funeral games in honour of Aeneas's father, and Book 6 brings him to Italy, where he goes into the underworld to see his father. Here, he meets Dido again as well. Finally sailing up the Tiber and setting up camp on the river's bank, Aeneas encounters the native inhabitants, the local people of Latium. The Latin Prince Turnus leads the war against



the new arrivals. After various bloody conflicts, the gods leave the scene and Aeneas and Turnus settle things with a one-to-one duel. Defeated, Turnus begs mercy for his father's sake; Aeneas hesitates, but then sees the belt Turnus stole from the dead Pallas, the boy Aeneas had pledged to protect. Enraged, Aeneas kills Turnus mercilessly. David West describes the whole epic as: "a dramatic representation of ordinary human relations and of the unpredictable in life, the place of justice in the world, the limits of human effort and understanding and the inscrutable splendour of the universe".

In English or modern Scots, that can be felt keenly but going back to Douglas is to feel the forces at work in the human and natural world twiced. The more effort you put into reading and rereading the work, the greater it becomes.

Descriptions in Douglas are tense, exciting and vivid, whether of battles or of individual portraits, such as those of Charon the ferryman who takes dead souls across the river into Hell, or of Venus dressed as a huntress in Book I, "Her skirt kiltit til hir bair kne". They stay in the mind. Try this one, of a storm at sea:

*Ane blasterend bub, out fra the narth braying,  
Gan ouer the foirschip in the bak sail dyng,  
And to the sternys up the fluide can cast,  
The ayris, hatchis, and the takillis brast,  
The schippis stewyn frawart hir went can writhe  
And turnit her braid side to the wallis swythe  
Heich as ane hill the jaw of watter brak,  
And in ane heip come on thame with ane swak.*

This is my modern English version:

*A blustering storm brays out from the north in a gale –  
Hurls itself over the prow and slams the back sail –  
And the flood swell beneath casts the ship's stern up to the stars  
And all bursts into bits, the oars and hatches and tackle and spars  
And the prow and then the whole vessel writhes and twists and slides  
And turns her broad flank on to the ocean's leaning walls, their sides,*



*As high as a hill, a jaw of water breaks open and crack!*

*A mountainside of water falls down upon them, whack!*

You can “get” the English easily enough but the poetry is in the Scots. It was the American poet Ezra Pound who championed Douglas in the 20th century. In his essay “Landor” (1917), Pound says that Douglas improved on Virgil “whenever the text touches the sea or the elements.” And in his *ABC of Reading* (1951), Pound writes: “the texture of Gavin’s verse is stronger, the resilience greater than Chaucer’s” and he admits, “I get considerably more pleasure from the Bishop of Dunkeld than from the original highly cultured but non-seafaring author.”

The poetry of Gavin Douglas also marks a key moment in Scottish literary history with regard to the Scots language. The development of Scots as a language for literature, as well as a spoken language for many people, signifies a turning point that distinguishes it from English in a specific way, and Douglas notes it emphatically.

In the court of James IV, Gaelic, Latin, French, Spanish and English were all familiar. Dunbar called the language in which he wrote his poems “Inglis” and acknowledged the authority of Chaucer while writing poetry of an intensity that Chaucer could never have mastered. But when Gavin Douglas marked the distinction by saying explicitly that his language was not “Inglis” but “Scottis” he was aligning the language we now call Scots with the status of the other languages known to him, identifying it as a vernacular tongue with a validity as convincing and comprehensive as the Latin from which he was translating Virgil, and as the Gaelic he would have heard regularly. Most crucially, he was distinguishing it from English by asserting the validity of political national self-determination: “This buke I dedicait” he wrote, “written in the language of the Scottis natioun.”

Similarly, the “Dedication” in *The Complaynt of Scotland* (a work whose authorship remains disputed, published in 1549, and a major source of information about the Scots Ballads, their language and provenance), includes this passage: “Nou heir I exort al philosophouris, historiographours, ande oratours of our Scottis natioune, to support and til excuse my barbir agrest termis: for I thocht it nocht necessair til hef fardit ande lardit this tracteit vitht exquisite termis, quhilkis ar nocht daly vsit, bot rather hef vsit domestic Scottis langage, maist intelligibil for the vlgare pepil.” This aligns the use of Scots in literature with Dante’s essay of c.1305, *De vulgari eloquentia* (Of Eloquence in the Vulgar Tongue), written



in Latin but focusing on the question of the relation between Latin and vernacular Italian as spoken by most folk.

The language we call Scots is close to English but different from it. Before, through and since Douglas's time it has been spoken by people who breathed different air, worked different terrain, saw different landscapes and different people in them, than their English contemporaries. English and Scots – people and languages – have lived through different histories and this is part of how their languages work.

Douglas's identification of the Scots language in the early 16th century as something different from English helps us now to gather all the resources of Scotland, all the differences that make the nation, and propose that their co-operation and complementarities and indeed their conflicts are what constitutes different versions of Scotland. Understanding these differences is essential to understanding what Scotland is and might be. This is very different from suggesting that a single dominant language is needed for a single nation, and that such a language is superior to other languages. All the languages of Scotland live relative to each other. Some need more support than others. But none is singularly adequate to the experience of Scotland. Scottish literature itself is a testament to this sense of need. We need all the words we are given, all the words we can use, to express the world we find ourselves in. Above all other arts, literature is what helps us to do this.

The court of James IV with all its Renaissance glories of poetry, architecture and music, especially the music of Robert Carver, came to an end in 1513 at the Battle of Flodden. James IV and most of his courtiers were killed. It's likely that Dunbar survived beyond this date and Douglas certainly did, but the culture that allowed them to thrive was devastated. Carver himself was around thirty at the time of Flodden and continued writing music for another half century, through to the Reformation of the 1560s. That is, he lived and continued working through profound and far-reaching cultural and political changes.

While we can see the radical extent of the disruptions, we should also recognise the continuities and progressions. The human stories always need to be carried, in translations, transpositions, new forms, across such drastic fractures in history. This is the work our writers, composers and artists always bear. Douglas, while marking new literary and linguistic identity ("the language of the Scottis natioun") was also marking a continuity in human sympathy and understanding, from classical Rome and Greece before that, to 16th-century Scotland, and from then to us now.



**[Boxed off:]**

**When Glasgow hosted the Commonwealth Games in 2014, the Scottish Poetry Library and Glasgow University produced a little anthology of the games episodes in The Eneados, with Douglas's original Scots alongside David West's modern English translation. A few copies of The Games are still available for purchase from the SPL at: <http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/shop/catalogue/games>**

**Also essential reading is Glory and Honour: The Renaissance in Scotland by Andrea Thomas (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2013), a beautifully illustrated account of Scotland's contribution to Renaissance culture, in architecture, the arts, music, education, literature, chivalry, pageantry and warfare. It demonstrates beyond doubt the European provenance of Scottish culture in the 15th and 16th centuries and annihilates the myth that nothing of value pertained here before 1707 as ruthlessly as Aeneas did Turnus.**

**NEXT WEEK: John Purser on Scotland's greatest composer, Robert Carver.**