

THE VIRGIL SOCIETY

(From a letter to the *Times Literary Supplement*, 18th December, 1943)

The purpose of the Virgil Society is to bring together those men and women everywhere who are united in cherishing the central educational tradition of Western Europe. Among such persons the love of the poetry of Virgil is most likely to be found; and for such persons he is the fitting symbol of that tradition. Virgil is the poet who has been most studied and loved, uninterruptedly through the centuries which divide him from our own; he is the witness to the continuity of our civilization; among Roman poets he is the one whose work has always been the most appropriate within the Christian educational frame.

He is not only the symbol of continuous tradition; he himself, as a poet, was engaged in the very activity which this society aims to undertake. He sought to bring home to the Romans of his day that they were the heirs of a great tradition; that a people with a great past is a people with great responsibilities which should look to a great future; and he saw that the time of Rome's imperial activity was also a time of growing corruption of morals and manners at the centre, which threatened to vitiate the Roman character and policy. He sought to remind his fellow-countrymen of their pristine virtues, and to recall the urban population to the love of the land as the nursery of Roman strength.

The Virgil Society already includes in its company leading Virgilian scholars both in and outside the academic world. But its main appeal is not to the professional student; it is to all who are anxious to preserve the educational tradition which the study of Virgil represents, to respect special knowledge and competence, and to honour quality rather than numbers: these concerns are essential to our purpose. Those who share the convictions and aims of the society, even though they have little or no Latin and have never experienced the great music of the Latin verse, should be among our members.

It is our intention that the Society shall have branches throughout the country, with local secretaries, united through the general secretary. Members of these local branches will then have the opportunity of hearing from time to time addresses and papers in support of the ideas which the society has been founded to uphold. We believe that these local branches will, in varying degrees of strength and numbers, play an important part in the intellectual life of the country, in reversing the present descent to vulgarization of taste and debasement of standards.

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EDITORIAL

How often has the adjective "materialistic" been flung at our modern civilisation! It is now so hackneyed a reproach that it has lost its force and no longer scathes. Few trouble to question the indictment and take it to heart. As the tide of materialism advances further into all sphere of life, so it becomes more difficult to resist, because more difficult to distinguish. Perhaps there is no sadder symptom of our sick and struggling generation than the almost universal disappearance of the classics as the basis of education: and this is intimately connected with the rise of materialism. For the classics do not give obvious and immediate results, and quick returns are what modern politicians demand. The influence of the classics is purely spiritual. They provide an interior discipline of high aesthetic values and enable one to exploit the possibilities of language.

A happy phrase applied to Virgil by Charles Williams was: "he was set on the marble of exchange" — a phrase which may be extended to the classics as a whole. The pity is that bad money is displacing the good.

However, there are signs of another spring. There is no doubt that a revival of classical studies is even now taking place. So far it is confined to academic circles, themselves rather constricted. The Virgil Society is doing much to bridge that wide gulf between the common man and the university.

It is also gratifying to observe that the classics in translation are enjoying a certain vogue. We would further this movement by recommending to our readers the Penguin Classics series, edited by E. V. Rieu, as the most accessible as well as the most readable specimens of classical translation. The *Odyssey*, three plays by Sophocles, Tacitus' *Agricola* and *Germany*, Xenophon's *Persian Expedition*, and Virgil's *Pastoral Poems*, already have appeared and many others are in preparation. The English-speaking world is fortunate in possessing a number of competent translators, of genuine artistic merit; among whom we may mention C. Day Lewis, whose version of the *Georgics* is admirable, and R. C. Trevelyan who has devoted himself to Greek and Latin lyric poetry. The reason for the success of these works is that the outworn, rhetorical style, so long inevitably associated with the classics, has been abandoned in favour of a simpler and more direct approach.

It would be interesting to trace the fate of the Latin culture throughout the ages. It is certain that its progress has not been as continuous and unchequered as has often been thought. Many times has it encountered opposition and challenge. It has been despised as being unoriginal and unspeculative, relying on the discoveries of other cultures. Those who have found fault with the Latin tradition has always forgotten Rome's perennial office: Rome as the great entrepôt of culture.