

## Confessions of a Virgilian

‘Confessions of a Virgilian.’ Does the title suggest Augustine or Rousseau or something less salubrious? To confess is up to a point somewhere short of penitence to defend. Apologetic is two-edged. Yet confession is good for the soul. Therefore one assumes that by the act of confessing a Virgilian might become a better Virgilian, or at another level defend his Virgilianism. More particularly, perhaps, on an occasion like this, before a congregation of believers, *coram populo*—believers and arbiters of faith and virtue. For, on the other hand, confession assumes sin, a will to amend. Neither in this case may be true. Let the People of Virgil judge.

A starting-point: why a Virgil Society? It is a recognition of the pre-eminence of our poet, his place, once and now, and hereafter. A society pays tribute, unites in admiration, desires to learn. The Virgil Society proclaims, commemorates, recommends, and even dares to praise. Some two millennia after the *Eclogues* we are here as Virgilians. It is a kind of faith. The world would be poorer and less true without it.

In that sense I am a Virgilian. I share the faith. It is grounded on experience and tested by time. But faith must, in this instance as in others, be blind. I cannot convince others of my belief in the greatness and value of Virgil. Indeed, in my last examination of conscience, I found that in truth I know nothing of Virgil despite the years as a practising and ‘devout’ Virgilian. Nor shall I, in a sense, know more on my deathbed. But I shall still have the faith. That has to be enough.

*ii*

A distant scene, but no so long ago. A class-room: in it myself—at least in terms of physical and nominal continuity—with an Oxford text (Hirzel, not Mynors), brand new. To me, a source of curiosity and fascination, a wish to decipher. ‘*Tityre, tu patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi . . .*’ The words are read. I knew some Virgil before this, but it was at that precise moment that I became a Virgilian.

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Mentioning Tityrus and Meliboeus involves latent assumptions. No one in this audience is a native speaker of Greek or Latin. No one is (I imagine) a neatherd, shepherd, goatherd or nymph. Indeed, the use of a typewriter to prepare material about a bucolic/pastoral world might be treasonable. When we drive through the country on a motorway to picnic on a river-bank, gazing, if unlucky, at fleets of pleasure-craft, we still, anomalously, have dim illusions of a lost rurality, of a closeness to the 'nature' that governs all. We are exiles not from the City but from the Garden of Eden: Babel came later, as did Athens, Alexandria, Rome, London, New York and Milton Keynes. Yet it is in the nature of exiles to experience nostalgia, even if home has long since become a scarcely-remembered dream and the paths we walked as children have disappeared under hypermarkets and housing estates. More profoundly, we are all born into exile.

This typescript and bucolic poetry have, however, something in common. They are both sequences of marks on a page. Tityrus adds up to seven such marks, Meliboeus nine. The whole of Theocritus' *Idylls* and Virgil's *Eclogues*, when printed, consume a negligible quantity of ink, far less than a daily paper. The worlds within and beyond the marks have no existence to those for whom the marks remain just that. A statement obvious enough, if we are thinking only of literacy or knowledge of a particular language, less so if we raise the question as to why Theocritus and Virgil are apparently harder to read than *The Sun* or *The Times*. How art emerges from the thing is not a trivial matter. Typescript and pastoral start by sharing the same thingness. I might type these words or the first line of *Eclogue* 1. Whichever I do, Virgil's words and mine share the same materiality of paper and ink, of space and mark, *inane* and *corpora*. Pass beyond this and we begin to add. We may call our additions true or false. That is arbitrary. Only God can endow a not-yet-created thing with full meaning before it falls into phenomenality, and that is because for God nothing is 'not yet', not even nothing. God makes no additions, because he is Plenitude. Our own case is very different; we are doomed to supplementarity.

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'Art . . . is the becoming and happening of truth,' Heidegger remarked. A little later in the same essay, he wrote that 'all art . . . is . . . essentially

poetry.<sup>1</sup> One might question how truth is to be recognised as truth when one happens upon it. Art might be also the becoming and happening of falsehood. The Muses enlighten or deceive. Art may be light or darkness, depending who walks its ways. What we add to art for ourselves in reading or for others by writing about it may illumine or obscure. Moving beyond the mark, as move we must, is dangerous.

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Adam was not a shepherd. Nor were there shepherds under Cronos or Saturn. Pastoralism implies labour and labour is a falling—from grace, from Meaning to meanings. The fact that there were shepherds abiding in the fields made necessary the coming of the Good Shepherd. Human beings, it appears, became sheep when they started to tend them.

On that basis, Adam had no need of art. He spoke directly to God, for whom truth has always become and happened. It was only later that human voices mediated between the listener/reader and the omniscient (the Muses know all things). Poetry springs then from the world of labour, from the eating of the fruit of the tree. Writing is work; so is reading. So is being a shepherd. Only the lily toils not. Shepherds and goatherds play and sing at leisured moments, in the interstices that divide duty from duty. For them it is the grace that makes tolerable the whole business of toil. Before the fatal fruit was consumed there was only grace. But there was no art.

Art is then one result of falling. Something of this emerges from, for example, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem 'A musical instrument'. Pan, the great god, makes his revivifying and powerful pipe, but all is not wholly joyous:

Yet half a beast is the great god Pan,  
To laugh as he sits by the river,  
Making a poet out of a man:  
The true gods sigh for the cost and pain—  
For the reed which grows nevermore again  
As a reed with the reeds in the river.

A paradox. The reed that gives life to the lily and the dragon-fly also brings pain and loss. What music did the reed play before it was plucked? What was it before it was given a name and a use? Pan the piper is a

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powerful, but not the true, god. (But beware: he is prone to anger.)

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I might ask Pan a personal question. When and why did I first succumb to the allure of poetry, listen to the syrinx and cicada, *'patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi'*?

In early childhood, I heard quite a lot of poetry or verse. There were *When we were very young* and *Now we are six*. Snippets from other people's stores, from anthologies for children by Walter de la Mare and others. Whole verses, stray lines and resonant words are with me to this day. Somewhat later, a gift of Palgrave's *The Golden Treasury* with an appendix of modern additions. A revelation, indeed: I still have and use the book, a memento or talisman. At the time, the modern additions, no doubt little 'understood' (or better?), made in some ways the most impression: Yeats, Eliot, Edith Sitwell. Not so modern now, or perhaps even then. All of this has been somehow or other assimilated; certain rhythms, lines, words have helped to form my own language. It was about the same time that the Butcher/Leaf/Lang translations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* came my way. It was a momentous, even fatal development, as it seems now.

Later on still came the boon of exposure to Greek and Latin poetry on a much broader level. Here were 'modern additions' on a grand scale, for only an accident of chronology, time's flow, makes the ancients ancient. I have never fully lost my sense of the novelty, the innovative power and diversity of Greek and Latin poetry despite all that has happened since. For me the ancient poets are profoundly modern, contemporaries in a way that some writing of twenty years ago is not any more.

As I have mentioned, I was fourteen or so when I first read Virgil's *Eclogues*: Theocritus followed only a little afterwards. Both poets exert a certain thrall; not as repositories of scholarly problems (these came later and have their proper place) but as poetry sufficient to last for more than a lifetime. Virgil has now first place of the two; but his Greek predecessor runs close.

I feel no guilt in reading these two collections of poems for themselves as well as from what might be called a professional angle. Scholarship has obviously added to my knowledge; as to understanding—that is a different matter, for they are not to be identified; *episteme* is not *sophia*. These particular poems are strangely resistant to explication and wilt

when picked: frail flowers, wild ones, perhaps. It is because in this case (as in so many things that are important) an understanding based on knowledge only is always also a misunderstanding born of it. The *Idylls* (or rather some of them) and the *Eclogues* (all) appear to me as transparently obscure and obscurely transparent, so that there is rarely a time or mood when they fail to offer something, this or that, and to survive uninjured the extraction from them of whatever it is that is momentarily or more lastingly found. If this could be explained, it would be lost for ever. We can only ask Pan, out there in the back of beyond; but we bear his irascibility in mind. Frail flowers have sometimes to be picked but it is better not to trample them underfoot. None of which is a denunciation of scholarship (how could it be?): but these are confessions, for your ears alone.

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It may sound as if this paper should close there. One way, however, that it might continue is to cite other poems that share the quality to which I have briefly alluded. A selection might soon run into a substantial anthology, even though we are here treating only a certain class of poems, tenuous, pursuing a narrow path. I might, in defiance of all the definitions and exclusions so far advanced (of which D.M. Halperin has given a good sample), call that mysterious, occulted factor *X* the bucolic or pastoral impulse. The various poems anthologised would not all be 'about' goatherds or shepherds: but then, is the *Iliad* 'about' heroes? Indeed, if this haphazard and highly personal *florilegium* were brought into temporary union it would have to be by a deliberate act of classificatory distortion or generic misprision. That would be deemed by some as subversive as are in fact the texts themselves, and therefore open to scholarly dismissal. But, though dismissed, I should still have the texts.

There will be no such anthology here and now. But as an indulgence, I might begin with any one of a number of poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins. 'Felix Randal' is a clear candidate, but on this occasion I choose 'Spring' instead:

Nothing is so beautiful as spring—  
 When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush;  
 Thrush's eggs look little low heavens, and thrush  
 Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring

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The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing;  
The glassy peartree leaves and blooms, they brush  
The descending blue; that blue is all in a rush  
With richness; the racing lambs too have fair their fling.  
What is all this juice and all this joy?  
A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning  
In Eden garden.—Have, get, before it cloy,  
Before it cloud, Christ, Lord, and sour with sinning  
Innocent mind and Mayday in girl and boy,  
Most, o maid's child, thy choice and worthy the winning.

To read is always already to interpret. There is no first or primal reading. The universe was already systematised and encoded as marks before ever it was deciphered and disordered with names. Hopkins is not describing spring. He mimics a mimicry that embraces all inscribed springs, his own and ours. When was spring first inscribed? Ask Pan.

Factor *X* keeps turning while poetry is written. A second and final specimen: a poem, entitled 'Jesus', from Alan Moore's *Opia* (1986):<sup>2</sup>

Jesus was tired; he had been walking alone  
all day. He rested beneath the shade  
of an olive tree, breathing deeply  
the fragrant air. Insects were busy  
in the fields about him; he watched  
the birds rising and trilling  
in the cloud-flecked light blue

Women were coming out of their  
little white houses in the valley,  
beating their mats; one woman was  
dragging her boy by the ear because  
he had been taunting a dog. Others,  
in groups, were at their washing stones,  
where the river sparkled in the valley.

Dust rose in clouds behind a column  
of marching, laughing, Roman soldiers;  
the rhythmic muffled sound of their

sandals soon diminished. Their tall  
spears still shone in the distance  
when all sound had gone. Beside his hand,  
Jesus saw an ant carrying a crumb  
larger than itself. The wind was warm.

Jesus is here a resting exile, Tityrus and Melibeous. I attempt no valuation or criticism; one reads or does not read.

In a recent book on the bucolic/pastoral tradition, Jonathan Goldberg has remarked: 'The possibility of criticism rests on the most insecure of foundations, the endless decipherability of texts—and their endless withholding of ultimate answers. Texts are as unreadable as they are unreadable. To write permitting bafflement, acknowledging the excesses and outrages of texts (courting them even, if only to refuse the containment of formalistic procedure) means a practice of a certain *impertinence*.'<sup>3</sup> There is certainly something that takes flight from pertinence, which enforces unreadability at the level at which we are now accustomed to read, which baffles bafflement. Reading is to be learned again, re-discovered. For Jesus, the wind was warm.

*vii*

Silenus in Virgil's sixth *Eclogue* knows the universe backwards. His is a great and unending song of which we *homunculi* must make do with knowing little or nothing. Poetry itself has precious little to tell us but what little it tells it strives to tell better, and little is a relative term. Even a distich may be too long for us to possess all at once. How far separates *odi et amo* from *excrucior*? Despite the distance, interpretation has traditionally felt itself capable of dealing with what we might term 'macroeconomies', consigning 'microeconomies' to the scholiast/commentator.

Interpretation, like life itself, which never adds up to a distich, may be hard graft and hard grind; scholiasts/commentators can, by contrast, be quite fun. They can be read, almost, in isolation from the parent text, as can lexica. The lemma is a subtext, from which almost anything can grow. Commentators *stricto sensu* also interpret, of course, but more covertly.

*Tityre, tu patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi*: thus have many like myself been introduced to bucolic/pastoral. That each word is worthy of

annotation needs perhaps no demonstration, whether we take the vocative *Tityre*, or the tree that somehow manages to be both Greek and Latin at the same time and a different species in each. *Tegmine* is a strange word; *recubans* and *patulae* are both worth investigating. And that is all before we begin to think about style or versification, or anything else. I confess to having done all these things, and to having read a large number of glosses on the line. I am better informed, certainly, but there is still more that *might* be said, more to be done. Such is the universe of commentary. The line is still there, and the poem. And the poem is another universe; that we must not forget.

Meliboeus and Tityrus have suffered much at the hands of interpreters. The latter, indeed, has in recent years been assailed by some as thoroughly insensitive and smug. There is a danger, as Paul Alpers has reminded us, of dealing with this poem as if it were a drama, the background to which may be reconstructed on the basis of a series of clues. Just so, in the past, Tityrus was Virgil himself or his *vilicus*. Meliboeus and Tityrus are not people.

The *deus*, too. The young Octavian, we are assured on all sides, with only a few dissentient voices, like those of E.W. Leach and (in a modified way) J.R.G. Wright. The *deus* is, it is true, not identified directly with any figure on the stage of history, and lives in the same world as Meliboeus and Tityrus, wherever that is. The *deus* is Octavian, if you will: but then we need to consider what that might mean.

*Pascite, ut ante, boves, pueri, submitte tauros* is his *responsum* to Tityrus, who is in quest of his *libertas* (45). When was *ut ante*? Not anterior to verse 1, for there is nothing anterior to *Tityre, tu patulae recubans* within this universe. Alternatively, the *ut ante* is always anterior, then and now. 'Continue doing what you did.' Is that *libertas*? Who, apart from Tityrus, was 'there'? But then there never was a 'there', save in this poem. 'Tityrus' manumission is implicit': so some tell us. But was Tityrus ever a slave? What might it mean that a textual being is first a slave, in some anterior existence, and now free? In what world or language may the proposition 'Tityrus was a slave and is now free' be validated? Only in the world of the first *Eclogue*, a poem of 83 lines, and with two articulate residents. That is where the *deus* lives too.

These last three paragraphs have been intended merely to show how still further worlds (including the one we like to call 'real') come to be applied to the one contained in the text. And larger interpretations bring







need not be antithetical. Can entering a 'world' of scholarship be reconciled with entering a 'world' of poetry? That is a question not often baldly posed by scholars. To sunder the two entails a double risk. First, to assume that any reading of a poem is as good or bad as any other. Second, to lose the poem under the weight of learning.

One asks again: how many books and articles have been written about Virgil? We now even have an encyclopaedia. Is enough enough? This is to dismiss nothing. There is a pleasure here as well. We can live in more than one world.

The 'world' of poetry, if it can be entered at all, might, like the gift of faith which must be childlike, be of an inestimable value. We have now to say 'might', for there can be no question of proof. Perhaps, too, 'value' is the wrong word. We may be dealing in varieties of pleasure. The hedonic is not isolable from the 'worlds' of poetry. The pleasure of reading Lucretius is to be a way to understanding the cosmos and how to live in it, on Epicurean principles. In that way the pleasure of the text becomes salvific. Poetry may evangelise, or try to—for there is religious verse. Then the 'world' of poetry becomes the 'world' of piety. (Or of *pietas*: as for fashion, who now dares to write of Virgil as a 'spiritual' poet, at least in terms of an older spirituality?)

Pleasure is the simplest criterion. Virgil's sixth *Eclogue* seems to me to give pleasure until we demolish it in favour of too much meaning. Does Silenus preside over meaning? Is his song to be interpreted or enjoyed? For him, all things, from the creation to Gallus, even the grotesque and the tragic, can become an enchantment that is the object of desire on the part of his listeners. Look too closely for a meaning and the enchantment is lost, but not for ever. Hedonic reading implies in part the suspension of meaning, in that meaning is possession and possession, possessiveness are a disturbance. Silenus, though captured, sings willingly, and is still singing. It is we who are bound.

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Gospel words contain truths for those with ears to hear them: otherwise not. They have a Divine sanction. Who sanctions the 'truths' of poetry or philosophy? If critics claim to uncover 'meaning', is that 'meaning' 'truth'? Perhaps, in a certain world: but it is the critic's, not the poet's. And truth in that instance is true only in that world, with the critic as God looking for ears to hear. Those that hear and assent join the critic in his world.

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Virgil makes no direct claims to truth. Truth and falsity are forced on him only by a process of dismemberment. There is no Virgilian gospel. Turnus may die 'ambiguously' but Aeneas 'dies' with him. Rome predicted, is not Rome actualised. Aeneas never learns what his shield signifies: but he never marries Lavinia either. He lost Creusa, and Dido, but it is book 12 that kills him off. The rest is silence, as for all textual beings, like ourselves. The silence is filled with extraneous clamour. Writing is death, as Blanchot argued. Virgil himself died before completing the *Aeneid*—the writing of it, that is. We die before completing the *Aeneid*—the reading of it, that is. Clamour masks the fear of death and dying. Ears deafened by it can hear nothing.

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Earlier I cited a brief passage from Heidegger, which ended with a question; in answer one might remark that 'some do, but none should'. We should confess that sometimes we include ourselves among those who presume to claim and above all to know. Another side to the picture is perhaps given by Isaac Bashevis Singer's 'Penitent', writing of his wife:<sup>5</sup>

What good did the education do Cynthia? She studied literature but the whole course consisted of taking some bad writer and ascribing meanings to him that he himself never dreamed of. Well then, are the so-called good writers any good either? What important things did Eliot or Joyce have in mind when they were writing their empty phrases? What did they want? One page of *The Path of Righteousness* contains more wisdom and psychology than all their writings. They're often boring too.

Confession without penitence is a graceless sham. We Virgilians do not share this fictional antagonism to 'good writers', or at least in relation to one of them. Why not? We should hesitate before we answer, and may in the end decide that the answer is incommunicable in terms of knowledge. George Steiner's *Real Presences* faces such questions, among others. Confession and penitence are to be followed by amendment of life and the avoidance of sin in the future, which can only be achieved through grace. 'To live without reckoning is to die without grace' is a maxim known to another of Singer's characters.<sup>6</sup> In the matter of literature, there

may now be a need for penitence, but no less for reckoning, for the thinking that makes the books balance again. The start might be with Tityrus and Meliboeus, or elsewhere. Who would presume to know?

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**NOTES**

1. Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (trans. Albert Hofstadter; New York etc., 1975) 17–87 at pp. 71–2 (= 'Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes', 1935/1950/1960).
2. Alan Moore, *Opia: Poems* (London: Anvil Press, 1986) 70. (This is reproduced by kind permission of the author and publishers.)
3. Jonathan Goldberg, *Voice Terminal Echo: Postmodernism and English Renaissance Texts* (London, 1986) 7 (author's italics).
4. Martin Heidegger, 'What are poets for?', *Poetry, Language, Truth* (n. 1 above) 89–142 at p. 99 (= 'Wozu Dichter?' in *Holzwege*, 1st ed., Frankfurt-am-Main, 1950: the lecture was first delivered in 1926 but subsequently revised).
5. Isaac Bashevis Singer, *The Penitent* (Penguin ed., London, 1986) 16.
6. See Isaac Bashevis Singer, *The Manor* (Penguin ed., Harmondsworth, 1967) 21.

(This paper is a shortened and somewhat reworked version of a lecture delivered to the Virgil Society in 1989. Certain more purely philological sections, which will be used elsewhere, have been excised.)