

Through a Glass Darkly— Reality and Virgil

G.K. Chesterton once went to give a public lecture of some note. After being introduced he began to move his sizeable bulk towards the lectern. But just as he was about to speak, one of the younger members of the audience asked loudly, 'Mummy, what is that fat man for?' As children we quite naturally ask our parents that same question all the time, and as each answer comes we succeed in slotting another piece of the jigsaw of life into place. As we become aware of what everything is and of its function, so we learn more about the reality that is our world, our environment, the place where we live our lives.

We soon understand what a door is, a knife and fork, a bat and ball, but then come the rather harder questions like: what is a story for, or later on, what is an epic or an *Aeneid* for? To use the image of G.K. Chesterton, it is in one sense not just a very fat book.

Let us start at the most basic level. What is a story? A story is a narrative. Children read and are read stories and they take them at the level of simple narrative. They also derive great pleasure from them if, that is, they find them interesting. If they do not, then they just stop reading or listening and go on to something else. But the story is not necessarily simple. Some of the stories children read are of a fantastic or even grotesque kind. As children get older they understand that in the real world in which they live, animals cannot talk and people cannot just flap their arms up and down and fly. Yet, for children enjoying a story it does not really matter; what does matter is the fact that they are enjoying what they are reading and those stories which provide us with a means of escape are often those which still appeal to us when we have grown into adults.

By the time we have become adults, it naturally follows that our taste in reading matter will have become more sophisticated. Nowadays, of

course, the most common form of reading matter and probably the most popular is the novel. From Mills and Boon upwards we relax by escaping into the lives and experiences of others. A natural extension of that is also that the novel is big business. The Booker prize attracts enormous press attention and the winning book shoots up the best-seller list. If you look at the kind of novel that dominates these lists it is invariably the 'epic' stories about the rich and exotic who move in a world that is unknown to most of the readers; yet no matter how far removed the storyline is from the normal run of human experience, the reader still manages to find enough common ground of human response and feeling to be able to identify at least a little with the main character. Perhaps it is precisely this wish or even need to identify with a character, be the novel a kitchen-sink or a science-fiction work, that generates the enjoyment of reading for those who prefer fiction.

Most of the time when we pick up a novel, we do not think about how we are reading it or, in any deep sense, why we are reading it; although there are a large number of increasingly complex theories put forward. Reading without deep thoughts about the reasons why we are reading is the essence of reading for pleasure. When a book really grips our attention it begins to take on a certain reality for us as we become involved in the action. But then most novels have been written in the last two hundred and fifty years or so, and indeed most a good deal more recently than that. They throw up for us a whole series of temporary realities, which in many cases are then set aside as fast as the books themselves. We buy a novel at the supermarket, read it and bin it.

What this is leading up to is the fact that before we consider reality and Virgil, or any realities we impose upon Virgil, it is important that we have thought about the way that we read today. It is also important to remember that, whereas for us the novel is the most widely read and most acceptable form of literature, in Virgil's time the exact opposite was true. If there were any novels in our sense they were not considered to be literature.

For us, living in a world of throwaway books, the impact that this work of literature made on the readers of the ancient world is probably hard to understand. But, in the words of Propertius, here at last was something that was greater than the *Iliad*.

Virgil did more than just win a Booker Prize. He wrote a work which, from the moment it was published, became a universally read classic, a

GLORIA VESSEY

standard work, read and often memorised. No one binned the *Aeneid*. It became a text book, but that was not the reason why it was so widely read; nor was it because it said nice things about Rome which the Romans wanted to hear. It was read because it gave pleasure—but not a simple pleasure, because it was not a simple work. Two thousand years later, it is even less simple.

How then did Roman readers react to the *Aeneid*? In considering this question it does, of course, first have to be made clear that, as with readers today, no two reactions to a work of literature were the same: each one was unique and largely exclusive to the individual. In any case it would also be rather dangerous for us to assume that we could know what the Romans thought. Did they then read it as a poem, pure and simple, or did they like so many modern literary critics attempt to read more and more into every word, look and gesture? What we do know is that most of the 'burning questions' to which the modern critic seeks an answer were not even mentioned by the critics in the ancient world. The critics then were more concerned with analysing the language used by Virgil and the way he used it. Not all were won over by his style.

Would it be safe to assume that the Roman reader accepted that he could not really descend into the Underworld or become invisible, but that the story should be taken 'as if' one could? In the eyes of the modern critic this might be thought of as not really being good enough. There is always an ongoing search for the 'real': the real meaning, the real allegory, the real message. The question is, is this really the best way to look at the text, and if you do look at it this way, does it bring you any closer to 'reality'?

The German novelist Heinrich von Kleist was a master at presenting his readers with a sort of cautionary tale about *schein* and *sein*, that is, appearance and reality. In his books his characters are presented with a series of experiences or difficulties or one great tragedy and they cope by looking at the situation and deciding how they can best deal with what they *think* they are seeing. But the point that Kleist makes everywhere is that what we think we see may be the exact opposite of the reality. So in his works a saviour becomes an attacker, an honest person a cheat and a good person an evil one. Never trust what you see or think you see. Interestingly Kleist wrote about classical subjects like Penthesilea. In his work too there is a sense that the only reason that his characters are finally saved if they have done the right thing is because they have

remained true to themselves whatever they have had to deal with. That sort of character, battling on and staying true to what he knows he must do, looks rather familiar to us too—Aeneas and his famous *pietas* perhaps.

So when we read the *Aeneid* we too are, like Kleist's characters, setting out into very dangerous areas in trying to find the 'reality' of it all. We may find that we think that we understand what it is that we are reading, and that we can explain what the hidden or real meaning may be, when we are in fact doing no such thing, and anyway, who can tell us whether we are right—Virgil cannot.

Let us turn aside from his work for a moment and think a little about what we know about the 'real' world in which Virgil wrote.

Virgil grew up in a politically unstable society—civil wars, the assassination of Caesar and further civil war leading up to the final battle of Actium in 31BC had all shaken the Roman state to its foundations and insecurity about the future was rife. Against this background emerged this rather diffident perfectionist striving to produce a perfect epic poem. It took him a decade and even then he was not satisfied with it, believing it to fall short of the standard he really wanted and intended to try to achieve by going over it again. It is not surprising perhaps that he asked on his deathbed that it should be destroyed—maybe because he died knowing that he had failed to produce one perfect thing (at least perfect in his eyes) in an imperfect world. So some important things can be deduced from that. Firstly, that if you go to the trouble of devoting ten years of your life to producing the perfect poem, then there must be some very good purpose to it. Why would you bother to take a whole day to get a single line right? Some critics have suggested that what Virgil is trying to say in the *Aeneid* is that war is bad and that if you set out to carve out an empire of your own then you will have to commit some immoral acts along the way. In the end that will mean that you will lose more than you gain for yourself. This suggestion is all very well, but it begs several questions. The first is, would a man of intelligence really sit down every day for a decade and strive to write a masterpiece of epic poetry just to say that war is bad? If that was all he had wanted to say, then a short piece of writing would have done just as well. Besides, it is rather difficult to think how the *Aeneid* could have been written so that the reader would have thought that war was a good thing.

GLORIA VESSEY

What we can see from this one example is how difficult it is even to try to work out the answer to a simple question like why Virgil wrote the *Aeneid*. So if we start trying to turn the characters of the *Aeneid* into real people in order to help us reach the truth, then we are getting into even deeper water.

In his book, *Darkness Visible*, W.R. Johnson attempts to find out what is behind the 'famous blush' of Lavinia.

When in 12. 64–71 Turnus, enraged, resolves to go out and fight Aeneas in single combat, Lavinia, hearing her mother say she would rather die than see Aeneas as her son-in-law, blushes.

*accepit vocem lacrimis Lavinia matris
flagrantes perfusa genas, cui plurimus ignem
subiecit rubor, et calefacta per ora cucurrit.
Indum sanguineo veluti violaverit ostro
si quis ebur, aut mixta rubent ubi lilia multa
alba rosas: tales virgo dabat ore colores.
illum turbat amor, figitque in virgine vultus:
ardet in arma magis paucisque adfatur Amata . . .*

Johnson asks 'But why does she blush?' He goes on: 'We know nothing whatever of Lavinia's conscious thoughts, much less of her private fantasies. Does she respond to the passion of Turnus? Has she toyed with notions of the glamorous Asiatic barbarian, a white sheikh come to brighten her humdrum existence? One may speculate, but Virgil has seen to it that such speculation is as fruitless as it is boring . . .' (I cite Johnson merely as an example, one out of many, often less subtle, and still recurring.)

What one might better spend one's time on is speculating whether statements like these can actually be taken seriously? I freely admit that I have not the slightest idea as to whether Lavinia toyed with the notion of a glamorous sheikh carrying her off. This is probably mainly because I do not know how to work out what notions seven letters on a page joined together to form the name Lavinia are supposed to have. Lavinia is not a complete human being but a character in an epic poem created by a writer two thousand years ago, so how can anyone 'know'? There is nothing to know. Johnson himself admits the dangers of such questions when he says that not only do perceptions vary according to

trends and tastes, but that also, as we all perceive reality in a completely personal way, whatever we think of as the real meaning of the poem is bound to become overlaid with meanings and myths of our own making. Perhaps the real answer to the question why did Virgil say that Lavinia blushed and not give any explanation of it, was because he did not choose to or did not consider it necessary.

The women characters in the *Aeneid* seem to be particularly singled out for this kind of treatment—the most notable example, of course, being Dido. Among the questions asked about her are the ‘old chestnuts’, did she betray Sychaeus by falling in love with Aeneas, is she a victim of Fate or the gods, is she a tragic figure or simply a woman unable to come to terms with the fact that the man she loves has to fulfil the responsibility that has been given to him, in spite of whatever it is that he feels for her? These questions have often appeared in various forms, even as examination questions. But the real question is, are they worth answering, because so much of what is said about Dido seems to assume that she is real.

Aeneas has been seen as undertaking a sort of Trojan *Pilgrim's Progress*. Although he is stepping into the unknown he shoulders the awesome responsibility of founding Rome, trusting in himself, praying that whatever the obstacles placed in his path he will have the strength to go on. On that reading, Dido represents temptation, not only in the form of love, but in the form of complacency and forgetfulness of his duty—the most fatal error of all in Roman eyes. It takes Mercury in a rather ambiguous, even deceitful speech, it should be said, to persuade him to carry on. Is Dido then to be seen as an obstacle in his path or as a means by which Virgil can make a moral point about her guilt or innocence or about the costs of founding an empire? As Dido is Virgil's creation, how can we know?

Let us break off for a moment for a flight of fancy. We know that Virgil and Horace were close friends and it is a remarkable image that is conjured up in our minds if we try and imagine these two literary giants meeting and discussing their work with each other. It does not really seem very likely that Horace would have asked Virgil any of the above questions, but rather that their main topic of conversation would have been whether a certain line was quite right or a given word ought to be

GLORIA VESSEY

used or changed. In fact, they might not have understood the kind of questions which are so frequently asked today.

It can even be said that as we persist in trying to analyse every aspect of a character and his or her behaviour, we may actually end up making the glass darker. Things become much less clear. By wondering about whether Lavinia has fantasies about being carried off by a sheikh all we are really doing is dragging *into* our world, our reality and our terms of reference something which in no way belongs there.

When we set out to try to find answers to questions and hidden meanings in the text we are coming up against very difficult problems because the *Aeneid* is really a little world of its own. It is essentially self-contained and all that it needs is there inside it. The writer has included in the story all the characters and encounters, battles and heartbreak that he needs to complete his epic. So to find any sort of answer to anything we have to look at each line of the text, the phrases and words and in doing so forget about our experiences in the world around us and think about what is written on the page in front of us. When we then consider what little we know of the historical events and social conditions which the writer would have known and which produced the experiences he could use when he wrote, we might get more pertinent answers.

As, for example, science-fiction writing is self-defining, the greater part of its appeal lies in the fact that aspects of it are still obscure and mysterious to us. Not everything can be explained. The realities of literature are more real in a way because they are held within very limited space—that of the text itself. Once we start to read the text in such a way that we try all the time to turn every event in the story into some kind of concrete reality, usually by drawing parallels with our own world and making all sorts of false equations about things in the light of our feelings and how we think we would have responded to something, then we are quite likely to be getting ever further from the story and from any real chance of understanding any part of it meaningfully.

Aeneas is a character limited and constrained by Virgil's definition of him and by what Virgil tells us about his character. What the Aeneas character does in the *Aeneid* cannot be added to or in any way changed except when we allow our own ideas of what is right and wrong, of what someone should or should not do in a given situation to be overlaid on to the narrative.

Aeneas possessed one of the qualities held most dear by the Roman people; he was *pius*. But this *pietas* is actually defined by the text itself, that is, by Virgil. In other words, Aeneas shows us what Virgil thought *pietas* was all about. If we do not think that Aeneas does act with *pietas*, then that is just unfortunate for us because it is a pointless exercise for us to try to turn Aeneas into a model of what we think of as a *pius* hero.

At the end of the *Aeneid* when Aeneas kills Turnus the argument was once popular that this act made Aeneas betray his *pietas*, that by doing this he went against the principles for which he was supposed to stand. What he did could be said to have been the more human response unlike his leaving of Dido. We may want Aeneas to have more human responses, but that cannot be because Aeneas is Virgil's Aeneas, a character in an epic poem and not a real person with real choices.

This search for the real meaning of a text is not, of course, something which is confined to classical literature, but it is always dangerous to think that you can find out what lies behind 'the story on the page'. When J.R.R. Tolkien was asked what the 'real' meaning, that is the allegorical significance of *The Lord of the Rings* was, he said that it did not have one. It was a story that defined itself and should be read as such. Judging by its enduring popularity with young and old alike, it obviously does not need one. The question perhaps should be asked—if Tolkien did not need an allegorical meaning, why should we? Why do we find it necessary?

The Lord of the Rings is essentially a story of good against evil, but that does not really tell us much about why it is so popular, why so many people read it. Most stories contain this idea in some form or another. It is always possible to boil down long narratives to short and simple moral terms or to find in them a moral lesson.

Horace, perhaps not being entirely serious, does this with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in *Epistles* 1.2 where he assures Lollius Maximus (the man to whom the epistle is addressed) that Homer tells us what is good, what is bad, what is useful and what is not useful more clearly and better than the Stoic philosophers Chrysippus and Crantor. Part of the joke might be that the Stoics themselves were quite fond of drawing out morals from literature in the way that Horace himself then goes on to do. According to Horace the *Iliad* presents a narrative of human folly and corruption whereas Odysseus is a useful example of what virtue and wisdom can achieve:

GLORIA VESSEY

*Fabula, qua Paridis propter narratur amorem
Graecia barbariae lento collisa duello,
stultorum regum et populorum continet aestus.
Antenor censet belli praecidere causam.
quid Paris? ut salvus regnet vivatque beatus
cogi posse negat. Nestor componere litis
inter Peliden festinat et inter Atriden;
hunc amor, ira quidem communiter urit utrumque.
quidquid delirant reges, plectuntur Achivi.
seditione, dolis, scelere atque libidine et ira
Iliacos intra muros peccatur et extra.
rursus quid virtus et quid sapientia possit,
utile proposuit nobis exemplar Ulixen,
qui domitor Troiae multorum providus urbis
et mores hominum inspexit latumque per aequor,
dum sibi, dum sociis reditum parat, aspera multa
pertulit, adversis rerum immersabilis undis.
Sirenum voces et Circae pocula nosti;
quae si cum sociis stultus cupidusque bibisset,
sub domina meretrice fuisset turpis et excors,
vixisset canis immundus vel amica luto sus. (6-26)*

Horace then turns to our own position and our own failures. His reduction of the Homeric epics to simple statements about human behaviour finds its place within his own epistle. It is hardly intended to be a full 'account' of the epics of Homer or to explain why we really like to read them. In the end it is probably true that we feel a need to find some simple moral truth in long works of literature. But if you were asked to go away and write a 500-page novel just about good and evil, for example, you would soon find out that it is just not enough to sustain a long work of fiction. You need more elements in the story to make it work. But once you start to add the other ingredients that you need, the more likely you are to have your work analysed and interpreted, probably in a very sophisticated way, but in the end coming down to much the same thing as Horace's ironic treatment of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. This can be summed up as—here is a text, now let me tell you what it is all about.

If we now apply the Horatian principle to what has been said in this lecture so far, it really amounts to the fact that reading texts in the

wrong way does more harm than good. We can end up knowing a good deal less than we might about the text and liking it a good deal less as well.

To pose questions about a character in an ancient poem like the *Aeneid* and attempt to treat this literary character as a real person with independence of thought, feeling and will is, in the end, an unprofitable course, for the simple reason that if you start with a wrong premise you cannot arrive at the right answer. By treating characters as real and ascribing your own ideas and feelings to what the story tells us the characters do, you cannot claim that you have arrived at the real meaning of the work or, for that matter, expect others to agree with you.

Beware the critic who claims that everything he says can be proven by the text. Remember, every Christian sect says the same about the Bible. One might just as well write a thesis about a well-known soap-opera and ascribe to the characters in it actual choices in what they say and do. Mrs X would never have said that she would leave her husband if she had not been told to say that by Mr Y. Or is it rather a case of the actress just doing and saying what she is being told to do and say by the script that has been written for her and put in her hand? It may sound like a *reductio in absurdum*, but is it any less valid than the statement about Lavinia and the sheikh?

Perhaps the fact that the turning of books into films and television series, which has made us still more aware of and used to seeing famous characters in literature portrayed as real characters on the screen, means that we tend, almost without thinking, to turn our rather indistinct mental images into actual people.

When we hear the name of a famous literary character the name and, more importantly, the face of the actor or actress who has portrayed them often springs to mind. How many people think of the actor Derek Jacobi when they see the name of the Emperor Claudius? And, depending on the age of the person, when you speak about the character Sherlock Holmes, the older generations immediately mention Basil Rathbone and Peter Cushing, whilst the latest generation of admirers may wax lyrical about Jeremy Brett.

It has been scientifically assessed that the average person only recalls about 30% of what they hear, but they recall significantly more if the information given is backed up by a visual image.

This tendency to want some image to hang on to is perhaps an inbuilt

GLORIA VESSEY

one, a natural response. We do have a tendency to want to project our ideas and images on to a text as we do on to celluloid—hence maybe the description of the multi-million dollar film industry as a ‘dream factory’. After all, we read by a process of analogy and we do sometimes need to form an opinion about something that has not happened.

Interestingly, this tendency we have to analyse what we see and also the danger that there is in thinking that we really do understand it and are able, unlike the earlier characters in the books of the German author Kleist, whom I mentioned, to act in the sure knowledge that we are doing the right thing on the basis of having been able to tell the difference between appearance and reality, all appears in the *Aeneid* itself after Aeneas has made his journey into the Underworld.

Aeneas, as you will recall, has seen various terrifying shapes and figures. His reaction is described as follows:

*corripit hic subita trepidus formidine ferrum
Aeneas strictamque aciem venientibus offert,
et ni docta comes tenuis sine corpore vitas
admoneat volitare cava sub imagine formae,
inruat at frustra ferro diverberet umbras. (6.290–4)*

Unlike Aeneas we have no Sibyl beside us as we venture into the text, no one to assure, guide and explain, no arbiter of appearance and reality. We might allude to here, but not discuss, Aeneas’ departure from the Underworld through the Ivory Gate (6.896–8), which has quite needlessly been transformed into a problem with some remarkable solutions offered over the years. A number of realities have been confused in the debate. The image of Aeneas leaving through the door of false dreams is one which would have delighted Kleist.

All of this leads towards one question—if trying to treat the characters Virgil describes in the *Aeneid* as real people leads to inevitable failure because of the fundamentally wrong approach that is being taken, how can we really use the *Aeneid*? To come back to the first question, What is it for? What can it give us? Why read it at all?

I think, first of all, that it is not necessarily right that we should get anything particularly important out of a book, but assuming that we read certain books because we feel that we will benefit in some way or another, how should we approach a text like the *Aeneid*?

Initially, we can define what the *Aeneid* is in very simple terms: it is a poem written in hexameters and made up of a certain number of words. It also has a certain number of characters whose actions and experiences are described. At root these characters and what they do are nothing more than words on a page. It does not matter how many times you read the *Aeneid*, the characters, their actions and the world in which they live are always fixed and unchanging. It is your attitude and powers of observation that change. This is all rather different from the constantly changing and unstable world we live in.

What we get out of the text, and the best way to read it, is not something that can be rigidly defined. It may depend on when you read something, at what stage in your life or education, or for what purpose. There is a great difference in the way a text will be read by someone who wants to see what a work of literature written in ancient Rome was like and who decides to learn some Latin in order to read the *Aeneid* in the original on the train on the way to work, perhaps taking months over the job, and the seventeen year old student swotting for exams who has only a certain number of hours to devote to reading what is only one of several books that have to be studied, perhaps to get a place at university. Then there is the academic with a professional interest in Virgil and so on.

A further difference between the students (and let us concentrate on them and not the academic, since this is a lecture to which sixth forms have been invited) who are reading the text as part of a course of study leading to an examination in the Latin language and those for whom it forms part of a Classical Civilisation course, for which a knowledge of the language is not required. A glib answer might be that in the case of students of Latin, they have their time cut out simply making sense of the words and coping with the grammar and syntax and worrying about how to show in an essay why the text is a wonderful piece of poetry.

But how often does one hear from students who have taken A-levels and even who have completed University degrees that they never want or intend to pick up a classical text again because they have analysed every word until it drove them to distraction.

For those reading the texts in translation there is one particular trap which is that, unable to analyse the language of the original and in this way explain the merits of the text, it is tempting to treat the translation as if it were the original text and to approach it like a piece of English

GLORIA VESSEY

literature with a classical background. Stories are fun not because they are new but because they are different and there is certainly nothing wrong with liking the story of the *Aeneid*. But should that liking for the story lead back to an analysis of the characters as real people, then the whole thing has come full circle again.

It is necessary for people to know that there is an informed way of reading that is also enjoyable. This means, of course, that they need to be provided with information, sometimes of a very basic nature; for example, who was Aeneas, what happened to him in the Trojan war, what is a sibyl and how many of them were there in the ancient world, who was Augustus and what was his connection with Aeneas, and so on. These and many more questions, some not so simple, emerge and, in getting the answers, the text and also something of the world from which it came begins to emerge and to make something like sense. And that means not just the sense of the present day.

Many novelists today write books primarily because they want to give people enjoyment and pleasure in reading. Was Virgil so different, even if there are different levels of pleasure? Whether the *Aeneid* was or was not written to support or please Augustus is a question that is still being discussed, but whatever it was for, the poem had to be able to capture the imagination of the audience and hold it. An epic poem surely gives pleasure, whatever its other uses.

The more we gain by understanding, not necessarily the grammar, syntax and vocabulary alone, but also what we can of the Roman world, the less, hopefully, we need to interpolate our own ideas, morals, opinions and attitudes into the textual world of Aeneas.

Then if we do wish to make a judgment about the text, we can at least look at things from a more objective standpoint. We wish to come closer to the text, to see it more as it is, not through a glass darkly, but face to face—not simply how we think it should be or must be.

Obviously, not all our experience is irrelevant, but it has to be used with caution, particularly in view of a cultural background which is withdrawing further from the ancient world for most people.

It is easy to think that more information about the ancient world is available—certainly there are numerous documentaries and the large and varied archaeological evidence that it coming in all the time is constantly expanding the boundaries of our understanding—but we should not forget that people are playing with computer games at home

and that for many television is their only form of entertainment. In other words, the knowledge may be increasing, but so is the culture gap. Because we are human and so were the Romans, we are not completely cut off from them, but that too can be misleading.

The reality of the text always really stays the same, but the reality of the reader keeps changing. As the gap yawns into a chasm, so we seem to compensate by trying either to impose our reality more completely or by reducing the reality of Virgil and the ancient world generally to a sort of quaint picture, which is, in effect, depriving it of any reality it ever had.

St Paul's famous phrase implies that there are many realities and many true meanings, not all of them clear to us. He is, of course, thinking of the contrast between the world of the spirit and the world we have now. But the image he uses is striking. There will always be shades of darkness between different areas of reality, but the darkness does not have to remain impenetrable. There is a path to understanding, but we must take care where we tread.

London

GLORIA VESSEY

NOTE

This was a lecture to which sixth form students were invited. The lecture had to offer something to a group of people whose experience of the Latin language varied from a few years to a lifetime. So in writing it that thought was in the forefront of my mind. Some of the points being made are expressed in a less technical way, but the essence of what is being said is the same. Some ideas which have profound implications and many facets have had to be dealt with in a summary way.

Only the *Aeneid* was alluded to in this paper. Many of the same points might be made about the *Eclogues* and *Georgics*, but it would require further lectures to deal with them all. Besides, the *Aeneid* is more commonly read first, especially in schools.

The immense bibliography that now exists in relation to Virgil means that anything said about his work could easily become little more than a compilation of the views of other people. I have, in fact kept such references to the minimum.

The last thing I want to do is to make it any harder to see through the glass.