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The Whole Note

A Presidential Address given to the Society on 20 May 1995

It is remarkable that one of the most attractive of Roman poets should remain personally so unknown to us. He is as enigmatic in the *Georgics* as he is in the *Eclogues*, and in the *Aeneid* we are not easily able to read his personal feelings. It is a help that he was a friend of Horace, and that their experience of life, or at least of history and its consequences, which played so large a part in both their lives, was to some degree in common. At the time of the civil wars they were young men; their maturity was under Augustus, in days more troubled than we often suppose, when the band went on playing but the iceberg was already looming through the mist. Their determined optimism looks strange to us; I think we must assume that in their moments of triumphalism in poetry they did not entirely convince themselves. The age of Augustus papered over a chaos and a catastrophe with a sense of permanence and of balance that would be easily destroyed. As a human being Virgil appears to us more confident than I have suggested only because of his confident accomplishment as a poet.

But poetry at its deepest belongs to the defeated, and to the dead. The *Aeneid* all but begins with lamenting the dead (1.217 f.). In the first *Eclogue* that long, hot afternoon is full of talk about slaves and freedom, and of the sad prospect of journeys into exile. In the first book of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas is *fato profugus* (2), a man exiled and wind-blown (3), a sea-wanderer, replanting Troy and his defeated gods (68); when Jupiter declares 'I have put no measure, no time to them, | I have given *imperium* without end' (278 f.),'*imperium*' sounds like a heavy burden, as it was, or as we in retrospect see it to be, and when we are told that

Caesar will be born of beauty, and Trojan, reaching to the ultimate boundaries, the Ocean in empire, and the stars in fame (287–8), we feel some degree of irony, at least in retrospect, underlying the clichés. Virgil had been a philosopher after all, he was the best Greek poet to write in Latin, and a certain Greek sarcasm undermines the high phrases.

Virgil undermines himself in the *Aeneid* both by bitterness and his taste for death and ashes, but also by playfulness: Jupiter begins the speech I have cited with a smile, he gives Venus a kiss (256). She will welcome Caesar into heaven, weighed down with the loot of the Levant (289). One is not meant to believe it exactly. The whole book is wonderfully romantic; it is a Hellenistic poem, an enchanting game. Things get serious in Book 2 with the fire and ashes of Troy. Even in Book 1 (47) Virgil can keep the deadly serious part of his theme alive in the description of what sounds like an archaic Greek bronze relief of the Trojan war; there was an illustrated *Iliad* like a Greek strip cartoon, and doubtless Virgil had seen it. Troilus is dead, dragged in a runaway chariot (476–8) and in four words the scene freezes: *versa pulvis inscribitur hasta*. His dragged spear scribbles in the dust.

Virgil has more than one tone, and more than one skill. It is fascinating to follow through what it pleases him to do in his early poems into his mature work. All my life I have been inclined to Dryden's view that the *Georgics* are the greatest poem of the greatest poet, but their construction, which may follow Hellenistic models that we lack, is certainly and wilfully odd. For forty years I hoped that Roger Mynors would explain it, but now that we have his edition (OUP, 1990) we can see that the poem as a whole is an amazing and deliberate patchwork; it is like the waves of the sea. It is perhaps more profitably expounded in detail than as a whole. Yet the *Georgics* and even the *Aeneid* should be read whole, and of course aloud. As your great president T.S. Eliot wrote in his introduction to *In Parenthesis* by David Jones: 'if the *Georgics* do not excite us before we have understood them, no commentary will reveal to us their secret. Understanding begins in the sensibility…'. Or as Pound said of poetry (Ezra Pound, *Selected Prose* p. 30), one may say of the poetry of the *Georgics:* 'it reveals to us something of which we are unconscious, it feeds us with its energy'. So I shall not be ashamed to offer you the fruits of mere brooding and musing over Virgil, and opinions that have altered now and then. It has seemed to me that we can hazily discern Virgil's development as a poet, a certain altering sense in

him of what poetry is, or what it may best do. Much of the theme I wish to treat for you is apparently rooted in remarks made by Roger Mynors about the *Eclogues* in 1954, though I see that later he withdrew from a number of suggestions I thought he once made about the *Georgics*. I am sad to lose the retired pirate in the fourth *Georgic*, the one who became a market gardener near Tarentum. Still, as a gardener he survives, and his garden is a satisfying puzzle.

I hope I may safely ignore the extremely mixed bag of the poems in the *Appendix Virgiliana*, in the *Catalepton*: many of them are of interest, but they are not a secure basis for discussing Virgil's development, except possibly for the fifth:

> Be gone from me the hollow clang of youth,
> words fattened with a dew that is not Greek.
> Muses, be gone, you must be gone, sweet Muses;
> the truth is that you have been sweet to me;
> still come, yet rarely, modestly, among
> my papers...

He makes something magnificent out of this conflict between verse and philosophy, first expressed in a terribly minor poem, when he comes to write the closing passages of the second *Georgic*, the major statement of a theme that underlies his work as a poet. He expresses it again, with a charming irony and sadness, a diminuendo, in those lines at the end of the fourth *Georgic* which are his epilogue and signature, and which are never repeated. It is worth our while to dwell on them for a moment. He has just written his epyllion, the brilliantly retold story of Orpheus and Eurydice, interwoven with the scene of Proteus like Sir Walter Raleigh's Triton, and the extremely queer history of Aristaeus and the bees. Then comes the diminuendo (*Georgic* 4.559–66):

> I, Virgil sang of cattle, farms and trees,
> while Caesar's lightnings flashed on deep Euphrates,
> while he spoke laws to peoples, and they bowed,
> and his road opened to the Olympian gods:
> days when the Siren nourished me to flower
> in studies of unhonoured idleness,
> I played the shepherd's songs, and brave being young
> sang Tityrus under the broad oak shade.

This is not great poetry, or most of it is not—it is just a signature; Virgil includes his name twice, though English syntax and the brevity of the blank verse line allowed it only once in this version. Parthenope is the Siren of Naples; he calls her *dulcis*, as he did the Muses. The effect of the whole little piece is like that of a Greek epigram, or perhaps two contrasted Greek epigrams. It was that ability to produce poetry like the Hellenistic epigram in Latin, almost to translate or adapt into Latin, that makes his *Eclogues* so sharp and sensory from the beginning. It is these strong stabs of colour, texture, heat or cold, sun or shade, that startle us as much in Virgil as they do in Andrew Marvell. Theocritus himself had written epigrams and I do feel that they influence his bucolic poetry, but Virgil is sharper, and we cannot at this moment pursue the feeling I mean further than the *Eclogues* except to say that the same startling detail is to be found in other Hellenistic poets, and in Homer: the white thistle-fluff in Aratus (921 ff.) the tranquil chanting of the owl when a storm withers (999), and I seem to remember a curiously musical tree-frog—was it in Nicander?

We are used to the idea that this trick is one of the principal resources of poetry, But Virgil does it particularly well. He has learnt it because the balance of colour or of textures in words is an essential ingredient of Hellenistic epigram, and the suspense of a word in a precise eddy of the current, in a precise run of the rhythm of a line, must have been exactly studied. It is particularly noticeable in these passages directly adapted in the *Eclogues* from Greek epigram, in that strange contest for example where the herdsmen compete in a contest of these poems matching one another line for line, like masters of the haiku, masters of the linked haiku—like disciples of Basho, Corydon and Thyrsis, *ambo florentes aetatibus, Arcades ambo*: both in their flowering age, Arcadians both.

The answer to the threat of roasting summer and the slow swelling of the buds is a poem about soot-blackened timbers and plenty of fire and a winter landscape. That is, he offers a contrasted but a linked theme. Then:

> Here junipers and hairy chestnut stand
> the fruit lies scattered under its own tree:
> all smiles: but if lovely Alexis
> went from these hills, the rivers would run dry. (53 ff.)

Thyrsis takes up the theme:

> The fields are dry,
> the thirsty grass dies of thirst in the bad air:
> when Phyllis comes the wood will all be green,
> Jupiter will come down in showers of happy
> rainfall. (57 ff.)

These pretty verses go on in the same spirit. Corydon wins. The scene is memorable and the poems are trivial: *ludus,* a game. (7.11 f.)

> Through these meadows the cattle come to drink
> and Mincius covers his own green bank
> with bending reed, the bees boom from the oak.

I find as I grow old that Virgil suits old age, because he is a poet who repays musing—something which is not quite scholarly in the way one reads him. It would be easy enough to exhaust a lecture on this one poem, but today I intend to muse more generally, observing only that the game really existed though Virgil had probably never heard it played. Even in Theocritus we catch only faint echoes of folk poetry. What Virgil likes is the pungency of the images, and the diminuendo of the rhythm. He is the master of diminuendo in almost all these poems except the fourth and even that ends with a human and quiet note. *Caesaris astrum* (9.47) brings harvest to the fields and colour to the grape, but the poem dies away as others do. The urban poem about magic (*Ecl.* 8) turns to pastoral and ends both its parts in a diminuendo. I am led to suppose that, until the *Georgics,* Virgil has hardly attempted crescendo. In the *Aeneid* he attempts it seldom, and not always successfully. The prophecy of the Roman future for example at the end of Book 8 is a farrago of baroque nonsense. All the same it is clearer and better written than the dedication of *Georgic* 3. But let us accompany this very great poet, this master of small effects and slow rhythms, as he advances towards poetry in quite another style. Many themes from the *Eclogues* stay with him: phrases like *placeant ante omnia silvae* and *trahit sua quemque voluptas* (*Ecl.* 2.64 and 67) will recur. Variation, which is the heart of the *Eclogues*, is his friend in the *Georgics*, and without it the *Aeneid* would flop.

Virgil is fascinated by the echoes and re-echoes of woods and trees

and mountains, and by the peculiar varieties and intensities of the colour green—the colour of a lizard or a snake. He likes the contrast of green and snowy white: *candidum*, not the milky white which is *album*. It occurs already in the *Eclogues*, (6.54 f.), where the white bull 'propping his side of snow on soft bluebells | beneath black ilex ruminates pale grass', two lines in which slight exaggerations add to the thrilling picture. He does it more memorably in the dedication of the third *Georgic* (3.13), words simple enough for the New Testament: 'a white temple in a green meadow'. This is a crescendo passage, and baroque too. We have already had Virgil bringing home the Muses from their Greek mountain top, bringing home the palms of Palestine to Mantua, then this (3.13 ff.):

> and build my white temple in green meadows,
> by water where slow wandering Mincius
> strays and his bank is covered with weak reeds.

Marble, *marmor*, is what the Greeks call white stone, *lithos leukos*. The word 'marble' in Greek only means glittering; 'white' is assumed. The crescendo of the reedy passage in the dedication of the third *Georgic* continues until it would be fair to say that Virgil reaches a climax of some confusion. He seems to propose moving the Olympic games to Mantua in honour of Caesar, with races for a hundred chariots, running and boxing. Virgil will be crowned, he will see the slaughtered cattle, or the scenery will show Britons embroidered on the curtain. This theatrical image remains obscure to us, but on the temple doors the arms of Quirinus will fight the sons of the Ganges in solid ivory and gold. All this *may* have something to do with the battle of Actium; it seems to me to be fearful rubbish. Mynors guides me but I fear his heart is not in it. When the idiot list of works of art falters to a close with 'the ruthless wheel and the insufferable rock' (3.39) Virgil tries to regain the drift of his argument by saying that, as for him, his road leads 'to the forests of the Dryads and the glens'. He hears the mighty reverberation of hounds yelling from Cithaeron and Taygetus, and the thunder of hooves from Epidaurus. He will soon have to talk about Caesar and his wars but first, we come to horses and cattle. Virgil's transitions in the *Georgics* can be extremely strange, and any mention of Caesar is liable to put him into a flurry.

The second *Georgic* presents no difficulty in its opening, and the fourth scarcely any, but the first, in which Caesar is stellified at the end of the prologue, does make one blink a little. There are roughly twelve divinities, and the series would be charming and even moving if Virgil had left them at that. The list of contents in the first few lines is even brilliant:

> What makes the crops flourish, under what star
> to turn the earth and marry vine to elm,
> how to farm cattle, what regime for flocks,
> what wise experience for thrifty bees,
> shall be my song. O great lights of this world
> who lead the seasons sliding round heaven...

The twelve are Sun and Moon, Liber and Ceres, Fauns and Dryads, Neptune, Aristaeus and Pan, Athena and Triptolemus, and Silvanus and all unnamed gods who care for things that spread by nature, and are not planted, and the senders of rain. Then in the same list in the same sentence comes Caesar, for whom a position has to be found in heaven (24–36). The argument is, to put it delicately, bizarre. Indeed the whole list of gods and goddesses is deliberately left vague, maybe so that Caesar can more easily be slipped into it. There should be twelve gods, though their names are not fixed: Varro (*de re rustica* 1) includes Flora, who prevents the blossom from coming too early, and Robigo, the goddess of mildew, presiding divinity of western Gloucestershire.

Pastoral poetry was a wonderful invention, perfected by Virgil, and not understood by Dr Johnson. Dr Johnson did not remember Milton's England, the wind roaring in the elms and the pears hissing in the grate. Poetry itself had altered: the poet Mandelstam [Osip Mandelstam (1891–1938) Russian poet. Ed.] wrote somewhere in a book review that 'It is possible to imagine the course of poetry as a history of uninterrupted irretrievable loss. The lost secrets are as innumerable as the innovations.' That is why Virgil in the *Eclogues* and the *Georgics* seems to be enigmatic, and is so probably in the *Aeneid*, which I conceive to be in part material less perfectly mastered.

In his early poetry Virgil attains a dandy's perfection. He says to boys who pick flowers and earth-ripening strawberries in the woods (*Ecl.* 3.92 f.) 'Run: a cold snake lies coiling in this grass.' The colour and the

coldness, the heat of dust and the flurry of fear are perfectly balanced. Indeed Virgil's mere lists of flowers and fruit, pale violets and heads of the poppies, narcissus and fresh scented aniseed (*Ecl.* 2.46 f.) the soft down on quinces and the waxen plum, are in their way incomparable. In the last books of the *Aeneid* they are fresher than ever. Dryden himself is defeated by them: in the preparations for the funeral in Book 11 he cannot manage 'soft violet or fainting hyacinth' (69).

> All pale he lies and looks a lovely flower
> New cropt by virgin hands to dress the bower;
> Unfaded yet, but yet unfed below,
> No more to mother earth or the green stem shall owe.

But the pastoral theme is not all flowers and shadows and lovers. It does overlap with the *Georgics*, and even with the arming of the Italians where the horn never heard before in those valleys shakes down the snow from the innocent Alps, and where Virgil is surely at his best. The theme, like so many of his deeper themes occurs early: it is in the cattle plague in the third *Georgic*:

> the air-defying Alps, the forts and mounds,
> the ruined kingdoms that the shepherd knows,
> and the long glens deserted and distant.

The flocks went up the Alps in spring and came down in winter as they still do. Other flocks shifted between the mountain forests of southern Calabria and the Gran Sasso d'Italia which towers above Sulmona, where Ovid was born—territory explored by Edward Lear in his youth, when the movement of the herdsmen and their flocks was still uninhibited, a hundred and fifty years ago. I am inclined to think that the essence of this poetry is best grasped by a figure still more recent: once again I have translated some Mandelstam. He is writing here in the neo-classic golden age the Russians enjoyed before 1917. This poem dates from 1916 and is called 'Midsummer':

> Orioles in the deep wood: vowel length
> is the one measure of all tonal verse:
> and on one day a year pure duration

pours out and nature's metre is Homer's.
Like a caesura that long day dawns
from early morning longueur's lazy weed:
oxen at pasture, golden indolence
won't let you drain the whole note from the reed.

There is no doubt that time, the long midday halt and the unstirred idleness of youth, are essential to the *Eclogues*, nor is there any doubt that the control of time, as of breath, is essential to poetry and to song. Fictitious time lies near the heart of all fiction; it is one of Virgil's secrets from the beginning. It enters into his varied length and the idea of length which he perfectly conveys in a few lines in the song Chromis and Mnasyllus drew from Silenus in *Eclogue* 6 (27 f.) 'and beast and Faun sported at his music and the stiff oak trees nodded their green heads', a song for which you and I have to wait until Ovid, or in the transformation of Gallus in *Eclogue* 10. These poems have the inner form of length, they convey a sense of length, even though very few of the *Eclogues* are as long as a hundred lines long. The principal problem that confronted Virgil in the *Georgics* was how to write a much longer poem. It is done as one may easily see by weaving together a variety of patches, of which even the amazing animal death at the end of the third is not a hundred lines long. Some are strange. Virgil assures his reader that dogs are particularly useful against Spanish footpads, who come up behind you, and for hunting wild donkeys (3.407–9). In the brief passage (404–13) he devotes to them, the splendid noise of hounds in full cry is summoned up for just a line or two, perhaps because he had already used it at the end of his dedication. Their use he thinks is limited: they can hunt hares or does, or disturb a wild boar in the woods or drive a stag into nets. The sheep-dog and the fox-hound and deer-hound are unknown to him; he knows only mastiffs. What is queerer still, he thinks that the olive tree and olive grove require no human intervention beyond harvesting. He can have known little about it.

But his control of the entire third *Georgic* is surely admirable: the way he substitutes cattle for horses to begin the discussion of breeding, and the sudden sting of detail work wonderfully.

They graze in open country and beside
Full rivers and the greenest mossy banks,
Wild groves and the rock shadows shelter them. (143 f.)

Then suddenly he is talking about the mosquito or the horse-fly and the green ilex-groves it infests on hills near Naples. Provided you have the appetite he expects for occasional Greek names, *Phyllirides Chiron Amythaoniusque Melampus*, the interest never flags. That much certainly he owes to Hesiod, and perhaps to the ragged patchy nature of the transmission of Hesiod. Yet where Virgil most shows original genius we feel most suspicion that a source in Callimachus must have existed, even if it is now lost. The masterpiece of the control of time in the *Georgics*, the exact calculation of pace, is the story of Aristaeus in the fourth *Georgic*. He was alluded to in the opening invocation as

> Dweller in the forest,
> For whom three hundred snow white cattle graze
> Rich Cean scrub... (1.14 f.)

and the bees as principal subject got a line (4) to themselves. The method of their treatment, the resolution of the most extraordinary tall tale Virgil or any Latin poet ever told, is astonishing. All we know about bees so far is the honey dripping from oak trees in the golden age: and that will not occur until the very last line (4.557 f.)

> Cloud upon cloud they swarmed on the tree-top
> Till all the bending boughs dripped honey down.

The control of time comes to rest on an image in which fiction yields to poetry; it is an effect that Shakespeare can produce with a masque set in a comedy.

The characters in these stories are no more real than the ones with interchangeable names in the *Eclogues*, and here even the pathos of poverty has evaporated. False pathos was the point about pastoral poetry justly attacked by Empson as a young man; it has little to do with Virgil and nothing to do with the fourth *Georgic*. In that, death itself all but dissolves into melody, like the name of Hylas, in what is at once the most lyrical and least realistic of all death scenes. Can the Hylas of Theocritus have inspired it? Who first connected Orpheus and Aristaeus? Bees come mysteriously from dead cattle in a number of Alexandrian and Egyptian poets; but the sin of Aristaeus that brings in Orpheus and Eurydice and explains the curse of Orpheus on his bees and brings in the

remedy, making him the inventor of bee-propagation, as he already was of cheese-making and the use of olive oil, is a fragile link. It is clearly stated only in line 457, in the word *te*. 'While she fled from you headlong by rivers the girl who was to die failed to see an enormous serpent at her feet, in deep grass guarding the riverbank.' Why flee? Maybe she was naked. We are not told that Aristaeus pursued her; he was innocent, unconscious of his sin. His connection with the thrilling ancient story of Orpheus and Eurydice is not confirmed by any writer and if Virgil did not invent it, to throw a sudden, dazzling light on the generation of bees, then it is wonderfully original and surprising. Indeed the wonder of generation is introduced earlier in the poem so that the details of this unlikely tale (281–314) will not obstruct the climax, the control of time.

The mythical story, which is a wonderful and delicate construction, is carefully set into the entire *Georgic*. At 283, 'It is time now to show the inventions of the Arcadian master': the inventions are set in Egypt, where indeed the foolish belief was apparently rampant, that new swarms of bees came from dead cattle: in the story of Samson they come from a dead lion. Virgil tells it so delicately one almost believes him (305 ff.):

> This when the west wind first drives in the waves,
> before meadows blush with colours, before
> the talking swallows nest in the house-beams.
> Hot liquid boils in the tender bones,
> and living things most wonderfully appear,
> first with no feet and then with whirring wings
> they mingle and then graze on the air's thinness,
> more, more, until like rain from summer clouds
> they burst, or whizz as arrows do from strings
> when the light Parthians come out to fight.

This *Georgic* is light from the beginning: 'Maecenas (2 f.), read this part, and wonder at so light a spectacle.' No doubt Virgil has thought of the pygmies and the cranes or the battles of frogs and mice, so the seriousness of his climax will come as a shock. 'No painted lizard's nasty sides' must come near the hives (13). Virgil's first fifty lines consider the bees' environment, then we see their behaviour, once again mock-heroic: battles so great which with a little dust are quieted (86 f.).

When Mynors lectured on this in the fifties he said it always reminded

him of the rattle of a handful of earth on the coffin-lid. His commentary pursues that line of thought. A few more lines about bees bring us to Priapus the garden god (111) and to the garden near Tarentum, where Propertius (2.34) thought Virgil wrote. The long paragraph on gardening does of course have to do with bee-keeping, but it may be too light for any other *Georgic*. Here it fits all but seamlessly, and the poem flows on to the natural history of bees (148), and so by way of diseases we come unsuspecting to the Arcadian master (283) and (315) to the story. Aristaeus had lost his bees in Tempe by death and hunger,

> Sadly he stood beside the holy head
> Of that remotest stream and grieving spoke:
> 'Mother Cyrene...'

His speech is boyish and furious, though hardly twenty lines long. His mother heard the noise in the depth of the river where she sat with her nymphs 'Who spun from fleeces dyed deep glassy green, | With the hair flowing down their snow-white necks' (335 ff.). One sings to the others the story of Vulcan thwarted by Mars, Venus's lover, telling from Chaos onwards the innumerable divine affairs (347).

It is not only a pretty scene but it makes time stand still, and Aristaeus's interrupting complaint is almost a surprise. A wave stood around him like a mountainside and he saw the roots of all the great rivers of the world. The nymphs wash and dry him, and Cyrene prays (382) to 'Father Ocean and my sister nymphs | Of a hundred rivers and a hundred woods' and is inspired to send Aristaeus to Proteus, 'Proteus the sea-purple god, whose chariot team are hippocamp, half horse and half fish'. The story might have flagged: it needed a new character, but here is one more baroque even than the roots of the rivers or Eridanus than whom no river races more violently to the purple sea (372 f.). Of all Virgil's thieving from Homer, the capture of Proteus is the most magnificent and successful. Then in a second the tone changes, and Proteus tells us of the lament for Eurydice, and of the grief of Orpheus, and at last of his fate:

> So Proteus, then he leapt into deep sea
> and the wave twisted foaming under him. (528 f.)

Cyrene counsels Aristaeus to placate the Napaeans (535), the Dryads (460) of the wooded glens: he must sacrifice Arcadian (539) cattle and leave their corpses in a leafy place. Nine days later he must offer poppies to Orpheus and a female calf to Eurydice. He does this at once, and:

> bees buzzed from the womb, they boiled from broken sides
> cloud upon cloud they swarmed in the treetop
> till all the bending boughs dripped honey down. (556 ff.)

The fact that this entire myth deals in different ways with life and death matters little. The death and dying grief of Orpheus is what registers most intensely; the liquid gold dripping in the tree functions as a return to the real world. The under-water kingdom was fantastic, splendid, truly extraordinary. Aristaeus is hardly alive at all. One remembers better the lamentation in the rocks. This *Georgic* may or may not be about bees or life or immortality—I greatly doubt that—but it is a masterpiece, and we have no other poem like it by Virgil. The Silenus of the *Eclogues* scarcely hints at this degree of ability. But Virgil never played again on those things: he settled down for the rest of his life to put together an *Aeneid*. The best disciple of the fourth *Georgic* was Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*; he constantly attempts to rival the intricate construction of these scenes, and always fails.

Let us be clear about the nature of Virgil's task. It must be a close adaptation of Homer and the commentaries on Homer, to make a Roman national epic in twelve books—no doubt twenty-four might have been welcomed, but six would not be enough. It could use any Homeric devices. Virgil had already used in the *Eclogues*, and now consummately in the fourth *Georgic*, the scene within a scene, the poem in a shell contrasted with its shell. He was in fact already a master of composition, of the planning of a poem of some 566 lines; the books of the *Aeneid* are about 800 lines, and it was carefully planned, book by book. Some indeed are perfect: Book 6 is a marvellously powerful poem. I am not so certain about the entire enterprise: there his composition, what I have called his control of time, appears to falter—and small wonder if it does. To your distinguished early President, that very great poet T.S. Eliot, Virgil has a greatness that went beyond poetry. He was lecturing on 16 October 1944 (*What is a Classic?* 1945), when the end of the war was in sight, and if he was to make Virgil the main pillar of the new Europe, and of its

tradition, as he determined to do, then Virgil's greatness had somehow to go beyond poetry. It had to affect civilization itself, and be a mark not just of Virgil's own mature powers, which indeed I suppose it is, but of the flowering and maturity of the language itself. This seems to me against common sense. I do not think Eliot knew enough about the Latin language to discern the degree of its maturity, whatever that may mean, in Plautus or in Terence or in Petronius. To him (p. 20) 'Catullus and Propertius seem ruffians, and Horace a trifle plebeian by comparison with Virgil', views one need not share, and he says (p. 25) 'English has no classic prose'. He is right to think that Milton was terribly overshadowed by the classics but was the Bible? Were Horace Walpole's letters? Were the Latin poems of Gray not more influenced by his tone as an English poet than his English poems were by any classical model? Eliot's mistake is of course a brilliant way of getting round Virgil's nationalism, which might have got confused in 1944 with the embarrassing she-wolf of Fascist Rome. I am myself doubtful to what degree Roman loyalty pervades the *Aeneid*: I suspect that this great poem insinuates a culture of defeat. It is of course quite possible, and I think it likely, that Virgil's loyalty was Italian, not Roman (Fraenkel used to suggest this in his classes) and that his heart was in the highlands. Or is it the habits of his poetry that nothing could shake off which make us think so? I cannot but feel that the great outburst of personal feeling at the end of the second *Georgic* (475 ff.) must be true about the permanent balance of his feelings:

> To me the Muses above all things sweet
> whose holy wreath I carry: their strong love
> has pierced me, may they show me heaven's roads,
> stars, the sun's failures and the labouring moon...
> Happy is he who knows the cause of things
> and sets his foot on fear, inexorable
> fate and the brawling of death's hungry streams,
> and lucky he that knows the country gods,
> Pan, old Silvanus and the sister Nymphs... (490 ff.)
> the life that golden Saturn lived on earth;
> no bugle blast was heard and no sword rang
> on the tough anvil to the hammer-blow. (538 ff.)

Virgil does not set about composing Book 1 of the *Aeneid* like someone

intending to shake off the shimmering style or rather styles of the fourth *Georgic*. One sees better what a wonderland he is creating and how romantic its happenings are, if one looks at it through Shakespeare's *Tempest*, which falls under the influence. Aeneas' fleet have scarcely put to sea from Sicily, 'bronze beak cutting the spume of the salt sea' (1.35), when Juno rushes to visit Aeolus:

> Here Aeolus the king in his vast cave
> governed the wrestling winds and sounding storm
> and with his chains and prisons shackles them
> while they in murmurous indignation rage
> within the mountain... (52 ff.)

This is not quite as light-hearted as the roots of the rivers, but it is wonderfully romantic. It recalls the cave of Sleep in Handel's *Semele*. Juno bribes the old king of storms with the present of one of her attendant Nymphs, and the sea-miracles begin, the wonderful storm and the still more wonderful calm.

> Cymothoe and Triton fend the ships
> from their sharp rock and Neptune with his trident
> opens vast Syrtes, calms the level sea
> and his light wheels slide on the crested wave. (144 ff.)

Aeneas comes to a cave with fresh water and seats in the living rock (167), a magical stillness. When Aeneas meets his mother in the middle of the book (314) she appears

> with virgin face and virgin dress and arms
> of Sparta or as Thracian Harpalyce outran the horses of
> Hebrus in flight. (315 ff.)

Is this the kind of comparison Homer might have written? Harpalyce is an obscure figure, and scholars are divided about whether she tires out her own horses or those of the river Hebrus, or if you care to emend, the wind Eurus. The lines are surely nothing but a pretty piece of Hellenistic ornament. It fits the context very well. Even the augury of the swans is lovely; what is more it reads as if it had strayed from an earlier poem.

> See twice six swans rejoicing in their line
> whom Jove's bird swooping from the highest heaven
> disturbs: some light on earth, some see them lighted
> and now again on whizzing wings they play,
> fly rings around the pole and flying sing. (393 ff.)

If these swans were singing in flight in the *Georgics* one would feel the need to comment. Young cygnets make a gentle twittering noise like young chickens but otherwise they are mute in real life. But this is wonderland: elsewhere in the *Aeneid* they sing even more definitely:

> When they come home from grazing and their long
> neck sings, until the river echoing sings
> and far away the Asian marsh resounds. (7.700 ff.)

The literary evidence is in fact all in favour of the song of swans, though a few intelligent writers do modify the tradition: Aristophanes in the *Birds* (769 f.) says they sit on the bank of the Hebrus uttering a wonderful choral paean to Apollo with their wings. Pliny thought the story of swansongs was nonsense, and Philostratus noticed the song was made by wing feathers, as of course it is. Virgil does not enquire deeply: if we think he should, we fail to understand what kind of poet he is. In the fourth *Georgic* he mentions the nightingale, which he calls *philomela*, as a simile for the grief of Orpheus:

> as Philomel grieves in the poplar shadow
> for her lost children the tough ploughman saw,
> and stole them featherless out of their nest:
> she weeps all night, and sitting on a branch
> she sings her endless miserable song
> and fills the place far with grief and lament. (511 ff.)

It is an observation half from myth, half from life. The bird as Philomela is mythical—a princess in grief transformed into a bird. The story of the peasant stealing the young birds is unlikely, though the Romans did eat them: this sad event would not make the bird sing for grief all the same.

There is a further connection between the nightingale and Orpheus, though I hesitate to introduce it because I suppose it had nothing to do

with Virgil's poem, but Pausanias (9.30.6) does record that Thracians say the nightingales sing loudest and sweetest on the grave of Orpheus. The queerest thing is that Theocritus likes nightingales, but in all Virgil this is the only one: why? The proper Latin word for one was *luscinia*. But *luscitio* means dimness of sight, night-blindness, *luscus* means blind in one eye. I have heard as a young man of people putting out the eyes of nightingales so that they would always sing because it would always be dark. Indeed it is still commonly, though wrongly, believed that nightingales sing only in the dark. If the Romans did blind them, that might put Virgil off the word *luscinia*, and the intensity of grief in the story of Philomela might rob this poetry of the innocent nightingales that sang in Roman gardens and the Roman countryside. That seems to me at least more the kind of poet he is.

It is hard after all to regard the nightingale in the poplar shade as more than musical grieving, supplementary to the musical tragic grief of Orpheus, which is becoming colder here. The poplar tree has been questioned because nightingales do not fly so high, but Virgil only says in the shadow of a poplar, and Mynors has heard them in the leafy skirts of poplars in the riverbeds of Castille; and I have certainly heard them in trees, once in Oxfordshire in May 1964, just above my head. But why is this Virgil's only nightingale? Because the impersonating bird can only be in the singular: there cannot be more than one Philomela. His avoidance of the word *luscinia*, which Horace (*Sat.* 2.3.245) uses at a banquet, may be purely aesthetic. He is sensitive to the noise of words to a degree where it is hard to follow him. He likes the Greek word *Pan*, which Horace avoids, and he avoids the crushed gravel of the grittier part of Horace's vocabulary. He prefers the Cisalpine resonance of Lucretius in his verse and the most delicate verbal music of Callimachus. When he calls incense Panchaean (4.379), it is the noise of the word he likes as much as the geography, the exotic quality of the incense. In the grotto of the goddess he does not wish to raise the Propertian ghost of '*multi pastor odoris* Arabs' (3.13.8). Considerations like these had become implicit, a second nature and style. When in those grotto scenes of the fourth *Georgic* he draws on the *Odyssey*, he cannot but discover that even Homer can dissolve into his style and re-emerge as Virgilian—not only in his more careful composition and the precision of his timing but in the texture of his language. His only greatness is the greatness of a poet: it lies in his reading of Greek as well as his composition of Latin.

The *Aeneid* is worked out a book at a time, and some books have unity as poems beyond what fiction would have. The first book is intensely romantic and magical, and he shows off a variety and fecundity of phrase. 'Orion rises rainy on the sea-flood' (535), Venus steals Ascanius 'to those high groves where soft amaracus breathing shadows kisses him with flowers' (692 ff.). One is in a mood to believe anything, though the beautiful people sit uneasily perhaps in the shadow of Apollonius of Rhodes's pretty Cupid. In the climax of the book we come back to the *Georgics* and the *Eclogues* in the song Iopas sings, 'Whence comes the human race and rains and fires, Arcturus and the rainy Hyades'; Dido falls deep in love, *longumque bibebat amorem* (749). Some books have a theme or recurring image which masters them like a sign of the zodiac. Book 2 is full of ruin and darkness; one has a sense of the escape from Troy through cries and shadows, to 'The mound of Ceres and her holy seat', 'the mound outside the city and old temple | Of Ceres abandoned and that ancient cypress | The religion of our fathers has preserved' (742 and 713 ff.). The darkness of Book 2 is shot though with fires and visions and strange lights until 'On Ida's crest the dawn star brought the day' (801). Book 3 is a pilgrimage through islands and apparitions, with its climax the sailor left behind among the Cyclopes. In Book 4 the theme is fire, passionate fire in the body, then visible fire in the death of Dido. In Book 5 it is water and the book ends with the death of Palinurus, with its unearthly calmness and the plaintive ending:

> When light sleep slithered from the heavens' stars
> moving darkness aside and the shadows
> seeking you, Palinurus, with sad dreams
> innocent: and the god sat on the high poop,
> like Phorbas, and poured out his words to you,
> 'Palinurus, son of Iasus,
> the tide carries the fleet, winds are even,
> there is a time for rest, lay down your head
> and steal your worn out eyes away from work.
> I will do your work for you a short time.' (838 ff.)

There is a continuity between books of course, since this deeply mysterious story closes Book 5 and introduces the underworld, which in a way is Virgil's masterpiece. Norden has commented so well on it I have

never found anything to add. I note only that the grief in which it ends (882 ff.) softens the hard advice the old grandfather gives the Romans about their role in life, a role which would not content Virgil, and looks a sad one to me. The word *memento* adds a pleasing touch of elderly pedantry to the speech and makes it less marmoreal.

> Remember, Roman: govern the peoples
> (these are the arts for you) give peace manners,
> spare the conquered and make war on the proud.
> So father Anchises, and he adds... (851 ff.)

If this were a play by Shakespeare there would be more than one way to do it. As it is, it is by no means a crescendo.

With the seventh book begins Virgil's geography. There was a book I read forty years ago that was out of date then, which I should like to see rewritten. I think it was by Warde Fowler and called 'Virgil's Gathering of the Clans'; it inspired me with some sense of Virgil's attention to the holes and corners of Italy, a feeling we encounter in the *Eclogues* but much more in the *Georgics*, in the cattle-trails of the Calabrian mountains, the *laudes Italiae* in the second *Georgic*, and the old gardener under the walls of Tarentum. In the *Aeneid*, the entry to the Tiber is thrilling, and the prophecy on the site of Rome is moving, but it is the revelation of the whole of Italy that grips. The Homeric model was the long lists in Book 2 of the *Iliad*, which as an antiquarian one cannot and as a lover of poetry one would be foolish to despise—but Virgil offers a fuller, livelier catalogue. Edward Lear as a young man in Rome projected an illustrated edition of Book 7, and I wish he had published it. For a translation of what is moving in the entry to Italy I rely on Dryden. Virgil signifies his antiquarian intention from the first lines of the book with the grave of Caieta, nurse of Aeneas, who is mentioned only for the port named after her and for her gravemound. Caieta had a local importance: Livy (40.2) says she shared a temple with Apollo at Formiae, and the tragedians knew her, but we do not. She gets just a four line epitaph like a Greek anthology epigram. Aeneas passes Circe's island through a sea shivering with moonlight, and in twenty lines he arrives in the mouth of the Tiber at dawn:

> Now when the rosie Morn began to rise,

> And wav'd her Saffron Streamer thro' the Skies;
> When Thetis blush'd in Purple, not her own,
> And from her Face the breathing Winds were blown;
> A sudden Silence sate upon the Sea,
> And sweeping Oars, with Strugling, urge their Way.
> The Trojan, from the Main beheld a Wood,
> Which thick with Shades, and a brown Horror, stood:
> Betwixt the Trees the Tyber took his course,
> With Whirlpools dimpl'd: and with downward Force,
> That drove the Sand along, he took his Way,
> About him, and above, and round the Wood
> The Birds that haunt the Borders of his Flood,
> That bath'd within, or bask'd upon his Side,
> To tuneful Songs their narrow Throats apply'd.
> The Captain gives Command, the joyful Train
> Glide thro' the gloomy Shade, and leave the Main.
> (Dryden 7.34–51 = 25–36)

Dryden seems to catch a lightness in Virgil's tone. We are still in wonderland really, and the howls of Circe's animals and Neptune's swift wind redouble the sensation. The threatening prologue about bloody wars that follows will convince nobody that the land is other than desirable and innocent with just those undertones of the formidable at the river mouth and as they pass into the darkness of the wood that the story requires. The end of the 8½ lines of the prologue to the second or *Iliad* half of the *Aeneid* are those parodied by Propertius *nescioquid maius nascitur Iliade* (2.34.66). Virgil in these moods does invite parody: *Maior rerum mihi nascitur ordo* | *maius opus moveo* (44 f.). Having uttered the grand words, he immediately says King Latinus was an old man who ruled his sleepy cities and his fields in a long trance of peace. His parents were Faunus and a Nymph, and the father of Faunus was a woodpecker. This charming little tale is not very frightening, but the old man has no son, only a daughter, old enough to be married, and Turnus is her suitor, the most beautiful of the many, a man powerful for generations and wonderfully in love. But there comes an omen: in the palace stood an ancient laurel tree holy to Apollo:

> A swarm of Bees, that cut the liquid Sky,

Unknown from where they took their airy Flight,
Upon the topmost Branch in Clouds alight:
There, with their clasping Feet together clung.
And a long Cluster from the Laurel hung.
(Dryden 97–101 = 64–7).

Worse, or clearer portents were to come. As Lavinia stood beside her father at the altar,

Strange to relate, the Flames, involv'd in Smoke
Of Incense, from the sacred Altar broke,
Caught her dishevell'd Hair, and rich Attire;
Her crown and Jewels crackled in the Fire:
From thence the fuming Trail began to spread,
And lambent Glories danc'd about her Head. (109–114 = 73–77)

So off goes Latinus to consult the oracle of Faunus:

sub alta
...Albunea, nemorum quae maxima sacro
fonte sonat, saevamque exhalat opaca mephitim. (82 ff.)

Dryden loses his courage over this, but it does appear that the oracle was at Tibur, and Horace confirms it. The sulphurous prophetic water was no doubt got rid of by some emperor or Cardinal. The Trojans in turn are encouraged by signs, and they settle down to explore the country. They come at once to that antiquarian wonder, the palace of Picus, with remarkable ancestral portraits carved in cedar:

There stood Sabinus, planter of the Vines;
On a short pruning-hook his Head reclines,
And studiously surveys his gen'rous Wines. (247–9 = 178–9)

Picus had a magic wand.

Yet could not with his Art avoid his Fate.
For Circe long had lov'd the Youth in vain,
Till Love, refus'd, converted to disdain:

> Then mixing pow'rful Herbs, with Magic Art,
> She chang'd his Form, who could not change his Heart;
> Constrain'd him in a Bird, a Chattering Pye. (259–64 = 187–91)

This is less solemn than the usual story, and it is stated in perfect epigrammatic form: he could not with his art avoid his fate, she changed his form who could not change his heart. It is a Latin subject but a Greek irony, and transformation into birds is a Greek literary art. And is all this great poetry? I think when all its simple elements are put together it probably is. It is certainly extremely enjoyable and graceful: in fact even more so than Ovid, which is to claim a good deal. Still I have a sense that Virgil is just cavorting. Before the book is over Juno will rouse Allecto and that appalling Fury will use her pet snake to envenom the Queen against the Trojans (329).

But Virgil surely is still in some sense playing: in particular when the Queen simulates the ravings of the Bacchantes (385). Can some lost scene from tragedy one day illuminate the preposterous story? But the episode in which Ascanius shoots the pet deer is well executed: the deer that obeyed the girl and let her twine garlands in its branching horns, and wash it in pure springs, the deer that came home on its own every night-fall (487 ff.) one believes in that. It rushed home and filled the place with groans and indignation. The princess called the peasants, and the goddess blasted a shepherd's horn—an Alpenhorn (513), so that the forest 'Shivered and the deep woods echoed with it' (515).

It was heard fifty or a hundred miles away, and the places are real (516 f.). Edward Lear painted at Nar, and the water still ran sulphurously. With this horn blast we become more serious. The whole of Book 7 has led us to horror of the war.

Then we are ready for Book 8 and what to me is one of the most moving scenes in Virgil. Aeneas had lain down to sleep.

> The god of the place heaved up his poplar leaves,
> old Tiber out of his own pleasant streams:
> and grey-green the thin linen covered him
> and river-reeds cast shadows on his hair. (31 ff.)

Under the ilexes on the river-bank Aeneas is assured he will find a white sow lying on the ground with thirty newborn white piglets

around her, so Ascanius will found Alba which will last thirty years. This pleasing method of divine communication proves accurate. Tiber gives good advice and he will lead Aeneas upstream. 'I am seablue Tiber, heaven's best loved stream' (64).

Aeneas finds the pig and makes offerings to Juno (82 f.). To Tiber he must pray only when he has won his war (61 f.). There is a story that Anna, the sister and confidant of Dido, found herself after unrecorded wanderings (I used to imagine) at the source of the Tiber, which is somewhere near Arrezzo but it was really where the river Numicus falls into the Tiber (Ov. *Met.* 14.598 f.). There she became the priestess of the river, and when the *Aeneid* was all over, when the war was over, and Turnus was dead, and Aeneas could think of his future, Anna was the priestess who absolved him, and washed and initiated him, so that he could turn into a god. It is curious that this was very close to the spot where Aeneas slept on the bank of the Tiber and dreamed the apparition of that Hellenistic river-god. Aeneas became a local god: θεὸς ἐπιχώριος, one of the *dii indigetes*, which is what Ovid (*Met.* 14.604) and Augustan inscriptions call him. As some said she was Anna Perenna, *amnis perennis*.

Virgil found himself in an overgrown forest of myth and theology and cut it away: his text unlike Homer's seldom reveals a stray version of any story. Varro said Anna not Dido may have been the impassioned lover of Aeneas: that would not do. Nor would his final sanctity and his absolution from sin do: that would rob the death of Turnus of its dramatic starkness, its Hellenic realism. That death is a long delayed climax many times led up to before it happens. Anyone interested in these things may be amused to count the trumpet calls that summon the heroes to battle, culminating in a sentence of two words: *signa canunt*, 'the trumpets sound'. Virgil seems almost more interested in the felling of trees to burn a hero's dead body than he is in the death—one is an image of the other no doubt. So step by step, with lists of trees, and the names of flowers, and Greek poetry of many kinds, the *Aeneid* winds toward its end and Aeneas is left with his sins upon him. Jupiter himself turned his eyes away from the slaughter in the Rutulian field (10.473). Virgil must reject the burial of Hector, since his hero must be victorious: this is a national poem, not a free composition. But the myth unlooses poetry of astonishing power.

The vengeance for the boy Pallas is less full-blooded than the fury of

Achilles for his dead friend and kinsman, yet it convinces (12.932–6). Turnus himself begs for his own body more briefly than Priam begged for Hector's, but not ignobly. The spear of Aeneas does not shine balefully like the star of autumn as the spear of Achilles does, but it has a fatal glitter (919).

> Not with less Rage the rattling Thunder falls,
> Or Stones from batt'ring Engins break the Walls.
> (Dryden 1336 f. = 921 ff.)

That is a metaphor Homer could not have summoned up. Virgil twists into one line the *tormentum*, the artillery, and the crash of a thunderbolt. But other metaphors in the last book take us straight back to the *Georgics*, and it may be to a kind of poetry he preferred to write. He repeats the battle of the bulls from the third *Georgic* (220 f.) at 12.720 f., and the hounds following a stag in an echoing river valley could as easily fit into the earlier poem. These echoing noises go back to Homer (*Il.* 21.9) but Virgil was thrilled by echoes, from his first poem to his last.

> The banks and pools re-echo with that noise
> Till heaven itself is filled up with thunder. (756 f.)

The progress of the fighting has many details that would seem bizarre if they were not based on the *Iliad*. The wild fig in the *Iliad* becomes an oleaster, bitter-leaved and holy to Faunus, where sailors hung their clothes in honour of Laurens. The tree holds on to Aeneas' spear because Turnus prays to Faunus. I do not believe it was a real tree; Virgil has simply adapted it, probably enough from something real. He is a poet drenched in antiquarianism, and yet piece by piece the narrative that he builds up runs swiftly and strongly towards its inevitable conclusion. No doubt the climax of the *Aeneid,* with the weight of so many books behind it, is a severe shock: I can only observe that the first *Georgic* ends in 'uncontrollable despair' (Mynors p. 99), the second in weariness, the third in death and plague, the fourth in swarms of bees bursting from the broken sides of dead and corrupted cattle.

Yet the impression of sadness and awe that the *Aeneid* leaves is overwhelming and no doubt all the more so to us, who are untroubled by the false hopes that we conceive to have troubled the Augustan age, and

used in the post-Victorian age when I first read Virgil at school, under masters brought up under Victoria, when much of the map was red, certainly to trouble ours. Maybe T.S. Eliot was right when he said that under modern conditions, 'Those who are not content to be provincial can only become hermits' (*What is a Classic*? p. 30). We know that even poetry is not everlasting, but it is to every generation fresh, it is perpetual, it renews itself as the language does. Reading Virgil is to understand a personal suffering and to hear a great, impersonal music, at times even a kind of joy, which are not natural to us. To read such a poet as deeply as we can demands the use of laborious faculties of intellect and imagination. But the labour will be infinitely rewarded:

> The rough wood-bramble and rank river-reed
> fall, and the idle beds of willow fall,
> the vines are tied, sickles cut through the bush,
> and the last workman chants the finished rank.
>
> (*Georgic* 2.413 ff.)

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