

Virgil's *Inheritors*

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Virgil's influence on twentieth century English literature has a distinctive profile: the figures who stand out at this end of the century are Homer (Derek Walcott's long narrative poem *Omeros* appeared in 1990 and Christopher Logue's versions of parts of the *Iliad* have been appearing since *Patrocleia* in 1962) and Ovid. Ted Hughes's *Tales from Ovid* appeared to critical acclaim in 1997. This followed closely on *After Ovid: New Metamorphoses* (1994), in which versions of the Ovidian tales are provided by 42 English language poets, some of them very important literary figures (including Seamus Heaney, Les Murray and Ted Hughes). Ovid holds an attraction for the modern audience which stems partly from the mythical nature of his material, partly from its variety, and perhaps partly from the fact that one can select from the collection and is not bound to read the whole epic.¹ In their introduction Lasdun and Hofmann write of the "casual satisfactions of montage, repetition, obliquity, sampling, channel hopping" as though they were characteristic of *After Ovid* rather than of the *Metamorphoses* themselves. Virgil has, by contrast, both a lower and less favoured profile. Auden's 'Secondary Epic' (1959) unfolds the inevitable failure of Anchises's prophecy of the glorious future of Rome, and Homer, Ovid and Dante are far more important in Pound's *Cantos* than Virgil is, Dante and Ovid than Virgil in Eliot's *Waste Land*.

Reputations change with the way in which the audience of a particular time and place reads any given author. In this paper I want primarily to look at the way Virgil's *Aeneid* seems to be revisited in Golding's *Inheritors*, but as a starting point I would like to make some comments about the way Virgil uses Homer, for the way in which authors relive in other

F.M.A. JONES

authors varies with the sociology of literature, the expectations and knowledge of the audience.

It is well known that Roman literature is heavily modelled on Greek. This becomes much more self-conscious and aware in the Augustan period, in which poets make claims to be transferring Greek genres into Latin in varying degrees of explicitness.² The concepts of imitation and models are, furthermore, dealt with in rhetorical and educational literature.³ But there is more to Virgil's use of Homer in the *Aeneid* than just literary habit and the taste of the times. The Homeric epics were especially well known to the Roman educated class, and were fundamental to Roman education, and furthermore the heroic values of the *Iliad* especially were clearly sympathetic to the kind of individualistic sense of honour that helped generate civil war and the end of the Republic, so that there was particular point in Virgil's use of Homer to produce a radical revaluation of what heroism should mean. We can see this already in the animal world of the *Georgics*, in Virgil's treatment of the glamorous horse with its epic and warlike trappings, and potential dangers,⁴ but it is much more systematically presented in the *Aeneid*. Aeneas is the inverse of a Homeric hero: he flees Troy in its last moments, carrying an old man and leading his wife and child (there is an obvious contrast with the Iliadic Hector who knowingly doomed himself and Troy in the fight with Achilles, with his wife and child inside the city), he becomes emotionally attached to Dido in Carthage, but leaves her on the command of the Gods, suppressing his personal feelings in favour of a more corporate duty (the contrast with the Homeric Odysseus who wants to leave Calypso and Circe is clear), and he has recurrent bouts of hopelessness (in Book 5, after the fire; in later books as he ponders alone awake when all else is asleep). The conflict between duty and personal inclination is a major element in the *Aeneid*, and one of a number of polar pairs which reinforce each other throughout, reason versus emotion, control versus anger, Jupiter versus Juno, male versus female, Rome versus Carthage, the future versus the past, and so on. We see these opposing elements at conflict inside Aeneas, but also inside Dido, Amata, and Turnus, and in each case the outcome is different. Turnus is a more Homeric hero than Aeneas, but that is not what the future needs. The fierce individualism of the Homeric heroes has a glamour in spite of (or even because of) the tragic implications, but stability requires a new and more colourless ethos, in which loyalties to

family, state and the divine plan take precedence and are summed up in Aeneas's personal epithet, *pius*.

There is, of course, another side of the picture, the cost in individual human lives.⁵ Poems and narratives (and of course the *Aeneid* is both) work on a multiplicity of often incommensurate levels; I have just touched on Virgil's use of Homer and its interrelation with one element of patterning and repetition. Another element of repetition, this time to do with imagery rather than thematic oppositions and their various embodiments, gives colour to the cost that others pay for Aeneas's mission.

At four points hunted or shot deer intersect in different ways with the narrative and there is both a local and cumulative effect. At 1.184ff the shipwrecked Aeneas shoots three deer to feed his companions. This is a functional and necessary act in terms of both survival and morale, and it takes place on the level of narration, it is part of the story.

The next appearance is of a deer hit by an arrow, and is different in a number of ways. It is when Dido is compared in a simile (4.68ff) to a deer shot and wounded by a shepherd (*pastor*, 71). The shepherd is to some extent a stand-in for Aeneas (in his role as protector of his flock, and in his unawareness of what has happened to the deer). In this instance Aeneas does not shoot at Dido intentionally, she is just an accidental victim of Aeneas's mission. The reader may observe the difference between this and the intended deer-shooting at 1.184ff, but the results are equally fatal,⁶ and both are the victims of Rome's future. The next case of deer-shooting returns to the narrative level. It is at once a more trivial and a more profound event. At 7.479ff another stand-in for Aeneas, his son Ascanius/Iulus, shoots a stag in a hunt. Here the primary element is sport rather than food, fun rather than necessity, though this in itself is not to be despised, and though the shooting is intentional, there is again an element of accident (at least on the human level),⁷ for it turns out in the end that this is a special deer in the care of Silvia, and its death is the immediate cause of the fighting which leads to the ensuing and bloody war.⁸

The fourth instance, like the second, comes in the form of a simile (12.749ff). Aeneas, himself hit by an arrow here, is chasing Turnus as a hound chases a deer. The same elements are present, but rearranged: motivation, intentionality, outcome. Aeneas chases Turnus with intent (though in the simile he is not this time represented by a human, and so the colour is different) in the context of open war, and the ultimate

F.M.A. JONES

outcome is Turnus's death, a death that seems to be due to Aeneas's losing control over the emotions he has had to try all along, with varying degrees of success, to subordinate to his mission.

The nature of the motive and of the outcome is different in all these cases, but the common element is the recurrent motif of deaths in the wake of Rome's history,⁹ and this raises questions about responsibility and the ideology of war and empire (though there is no single simple answer).¹⁰ It is this (among other things) that makes Virgil's poem a deeply serious one, but it is also this that has been, in varying degrees, an embarrassment in the late twentieth century¹¹ (I have already mentioned Auden's 'Secondary Epic' (1959) and its darker view of the 'future' of Rome.)

It is now time to turn to Golding's *Inheritors*. A number of Golding's novels have well known relationships with other works of literature. The *Lord of the Flies* is like a grimly revisionist version of *Coral Island* and *Pincher Martin* is similarly related to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. There are equally striking similarities between the *Inheritors* and the *Aeneid*. It is at once obvious that the three models, for want of a better word, are very different kinds of book and that none of them has the same status for us as Homer did for Virgil (indeed there is no real parallel at all for that). It follows that the similarities between Golding's novels and the models are not functional in precisely the way they are in Virgil, but this obviously does not mean that they are not functional at all. I shall return to this point after looking at the similarities themselves.

Firstly there is the basic level of the plot. In the *Aeneid* refugees sail to a new land and attempt to settle peacefully, but accidentally cause a war, mass destruction, and ultimately become the Romans, subsuming the native society. To the society they effectively replace (Latinus's kingdom) are clearly attributed the features of a long lost Golden Age (at Book 7.202ff they are the children of Saturn and they lack a penal code). The new society, that of Aeneas and his descendants, is marked out by prophecies as embodying world domination, power, and the arts of government rather than of literature, art and science (Anchises's speech at 6.847ff is a key passage in the epic as a whole). But also prefigured, inevitably because of the known facts of Roman history fresh in the minds and memories of Virgil and his contemporaries, is civil war. In the *Inheritors* a group of pre-humans return from their winter quarters by the sea to the inland site they occupy in summer by immemorial tradition. In the year of the narrative another group representing our own direct ancestors have already

arrived as runaways and settled on an island in the river which passes the native settlement. The new arrivals gradually kill and displace the original inhabitants.

The differences between Virgil and Golding are of colour and detail. As to the colour, although there is a general resemblance in plot-lines, the bulk of Golding's tale is told from the viewpoint of the original inhabitants, those displaced, specifically that of one of the group of pre-humans, Lok, and is a tale of loss and attrition and blank incomprehension of the events overtaking the group. Only the final chapter gives us the other perspective, that of those who are to become the future.¹² It is as though Golding gives us the viewpoint of Aeneas's accidental victims.

As regards the detail, the two groups in Golding are distinguished from each other by a broad range of features. The one is characterised as simple, happy and, despite the exigencies of the annual winter privations, living as if in a sort of Golden Age; the other, by contrast, is technologically advanced. In objective terms this is the core element upon which the other differences depend. This will be made clearer by treating the two groups individually.

The small pre-human group, who call themselves "the people" owing to their isolation from outside contact, eat roots, grubs and the like. They eat meat, but only the meat of animals slain by other animals or the like. They do not kill, and even so feel guilt at using the bodies so. The phrase "sweet and wicked meat" is an index of their mixed feelings. They cook the meat and have fire, but, like the meat itself, it is fire that they find, preserve and carry with them on their summer-winter migration. They do not know how to make fire themselves, and their culture is generally based on finding rather than making. The image of the deity (Oa) is a felicitously shaped root that has been found. A tree serves as a bridge (they are averse to water), a stone serves as a chopper. They are, furthermore, uncomfortable with novelty. For example, when the old woman wants to feed the dying Mal hot meat-water (i.e. broth) the idea of using a shell as a container for the liquid (the concept of a cup is alien to them) is dismissed as a "new thing." Instead she drips the meat-water drop by drop into Mal's mouth by dipping a stick in and out of it. On the other hand, though novelty worries them, they have a sense of the past (not a historical memory as such) in the form of a mythical impression of a summer without winter and a feeling of the antiquity of the overhang where they live in summer.

F.M.A. JONES

With the other group a nexus of contrasts emerges. They arrive by water, which they do not fear, in a boat which they have constructed. They light, quench, and relight fires. They cook, eat and relish meat. They also kill for the purpose, including the primitive child Liku whom they have caught and kept for a while, almost as a pet. Their culture is based not on finding, but on making. They build, and they make weapons. They use bows and arrows and one of them is carving an elaborate knife. There are differences and points of contact with the *Aeneid* here. It is not the case that the bow and arrow has a role as a fighting weapon in the *Aeneid* comparable to its role in Golding. But it does have another kind of prominence in the reader's mind, because of the first three occurrences of the killed or wounded deer motif. If this is a rather adventitious point of contact, another leads to a more substantial point: it is not the case that in Virgil one group is armed, the other not, but not only does Aeneas have a special, divinely crafted, shield, but it is also one which, like the knife in Golding, is fashioned far more elaborately than its mere function requires.

In fact, the making and artifice which characterise the newcomers in Golding persistently goes far beyond functionality and extends into the realms of artistic expression, social activity and a strong sense of personal individuation, and again there are both contrasts with the original inhabitants and also points of contact and contrasts with the *Aeneid*. The carving on the knife moves it along the continuum from mere tool towards art object, or rather questions the separability of what seem to be two ends of a scale. But the newcomers also paint, which, while it may seem to us less obviously useful, is only possible because of the same imaginative leap that produces the making of anything from something else, and which is the context also of the newcomers' making (and wearing) of clothes and jewellery and their strongly individuated hairstyles. Hand in hand with the individuation of the newcomers (much less developed in the original inhabitants) is the elaboration of their social rituals, which involve song, dance, festivities and the use of alcoholic drink. This latter element requires both manufacture and the design and construction of containers (contrast the original inhabitants' rejection of the idea of using even a natural product, a shell, as a drinking implement). The social structure, the individuality of the newcomers, and their vision beyond short-term needs all combine in the way they choose¹³ and compete for sexual partners (the sex-life of the original inhabitants is markedly undifferentiated),

and the “subtlety and imagination” with which they pursue sex as pleasure (as witnessed by Lok from his hiding place). Moreover, the young are socialised into the whole complex of values and skills by games, role-play, the use of dolls and toys (themselves artefacts); the children themselves build model houses. Artistic, technological and social development are all bound up with leisure and play, and are inseparable from the destructive aspects of human development.

There are two comparisons especially to be made with Virgil here. One concerns the relationship of art and power, the other the question of individuation. As regards the first, a key passage is *Aeneid* 6.847ff:

*excudent alii spirantia mollius aera
 (credo equidem), uiuos ducent de marmore uultus,
 orabunt causas melius, caelique meatus
 describent radio et surgentia sidera dicent:
 tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento
 (hae tibi erunt artes), pacique imponere morem,
 parcere subiectis et debellare superbos.*

Here in Anchises’s prophetic speech to Aeneas art and science are marked off almost as luxuries which the world power has, however reluctantly, to relinquish.¹⁴ While it may not be incompatible with Golding’s picture of a much more organic connection, it is clearly a radically different emphasis.¹⁵ As regards the second comparison, Aeneas embodies the conflict between personal desires and external duties which faces other characters in the *Aeneid* too, but he is, albeit imperfect, a model in his suppression of the personal in favour of the group. But others as well as Aeneas pay a price for his success (Dido, Pallas, Lausus), and his success rides on the back of much more destruction, in various degrees accidental or inevitable (at least in terms of the prize, Rome’s destiny). In Golding if anyone represents the group-based value system it is the members of “the people,” the original and artless inhabitants who are sacrificed to their more individuated and dynamic supplanters. For Golding art and science, individuality and aggression are inseparably bound together in a complex loss of Eden with all the compensations that follow and we enjoy, but the emphasis is on the loss, since the vast bulk of the tale is given from the perspective of the displaced and innocent victims. In Virgil the other voices are heard, and the destruction wreaked

F.M.A. JONES

by the Trojans is not concealed, but there is a persistent construction of an ideal which is meant to limit the damage, *pietas*.¹⁶

The relationship between the two works cannot be quite the same as between Virgil and Homer because Virgil does not hold for us a position equivalent to Homer's for Virgil; it is much less important for the reader of Golding to have read Virgil than for the reader of Virgil to have read Homer, and this is because we have a plethora of foundation myths (and loss of Eden myths, since Golding unites the two), like the Voortrekkers' monument, which give the same general point of reference, but there is still a similarity. Virgil uses Homer to generate a radical alternative value system. The *Aeneid* revalues the Homeric poems, makes it hard to read Homer in the same way as before; in a sense it turns the glamour of the Homeric heroes into a nostalgic but outmoded memory, or tries to. *The Inheritors* rewrites the *Aeneid* from the viewpoint of the victims and inevitably questions the value of what the victors gain. In Golding *pietas* looks very much like part of the price paid for development, but in this the difference from Virgil need not be exaggerated, for both ideals and lost Utopias are located other than in the perceived world around us.

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F.M.A. JONES

Notes

1. For more detail see F. Jones, *LCM* 19.3 & 4 (1994) 60–4.
2. Cf., for example, Hor. *Odes* 1.1, 3.30; Prop. 3.1, 4.1 etc.
3. See D.A. Russell in D.A. West and A.J. Woodman (eds), *Creative Imitation and Latin Literature* (Cambridge, 1979), 1–16.
4. Virgil interweaves the treatment of horses and cattle at *Georgics*.3.49–283.
5. This is also present in the *Eclogues* and *Georgics*. In the *Eclogues* public gain and private loss can be compared within *Ecl.* 1 and 9, and by comparing those two poems with *Ecl.*4. For the *Georgics* see J. Griffin, "The Fourth *Georgic*, Virgil and Rome", *G&R* 26 (1979) 61–80. The same theme can be traced in other Augustan poets.
6. In this case there are the additional complication of Venus's role and Cupid with his arrows.
7. *Allecto* is at work (7.476ff).
8. On this passage see Griffin (n.5), 66–7, who connects this passage with the simile at 4.68–73.
9. In the *Georgics*, life is a battle in which human survival often costs animals lives (like the birds who lose their homes). Cf. A. Betensky, 'The farmer's battles', *Ramus* 8(1979) 108–19; M. Gale, "War and peace in Lucretius and the *Georgics*" *PVS* 23(1998) 101–28.

VIRGIL'S INHERITORS

10. Cf. W.V. Harris, *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome, 327–70 B.C.* (Oxford 1979); R.O.A.M. Lyne, "Virgil and the politics of war", *CQ* 33 (1983) 188–203.
11. This is manifested rather differently within and outside the field of scholarly activity. Within that field there was in the 1960s and for some time onwards a susceptibility subsequently re-evaluated, to seeing the Augustan poets as criticising Augustus; Ovid and Propertius were the figureheads of this tendency, but Horace and Virgil were sometimes seen as writing from a similar, but more subtly expressed position. Among ordinary readers there is less of a potential vested interest in seeing a particular author as some sort of kindred spirit: it is easier in various ways simply to look elsewhere if a particular author seems alien.
12. Just as the adult perspective appears only at the end of *The Lord of the Flies*, and only at the end of *Pincher Martin* takes us outside the hero's mind.
13. The complications of love have led to the flight of the new people from wherever they were before. The complications of love do not take the same shape in the *Aeneid*, but it is Aeneas who comes against them in Carthage, and flight is the result here too.
14. See Griffin (n.5), 61–80.
15. Cf. Auden's *Horae Canonicae*.
16. There is another difference which deserves mention as well. Whereas in Virgil the language used is that of the ultimate harmonious amalgamation of Trojan and pre-Trojan to produce the Roman race, in Golding the new arrivals become terrified of the natives (in ignorance that they are all but exterminated) and demonize them.

