

***‘Semper honos nomenque tuum  
laudesque manebunt’:  
Virgil and Twelfth-Century Epic?***

***A paper given to the Virgil Society on 9 May 1998***

It is widely held that in the Middle Ages Virgil’s *Aeneid* was the best-known and most loved of Classical texts. No matter how tightly constricted became the wasp-waisted funnel through which the Classics were transmitted, there was always room for Virgil. Two examples, drawn from many, will, I hope, serve to illustrate this. At the end of the sixth century, the *Aeneid* was certainly known to the great historian of the Franks, Gregory of Tours, whose Latin style manifests a respect for rhetoric which stands in marked contrast to his constant struggle with the rules of grammar; true, Gregory’s knowledge of Virgil’s poem may not, like that of many subsequent readers, have extended much beyond the great storm scene in Book One, but he knew it nonetheless.<sup>1</sup> And in a similar vein, some years ago I sought to contest the assertion that another great historian, Bede, knew no more of Virgil’s poetry than such pickings as he could glean from the pages of Latin grammars. That contention was in itself by no means wrong-headed: medievalists must always bear in mind the possibility that Classical quotations and reminiscences may be drawn indirectly from intermediate sources. In Bede’s case, however, the saint’s own Latin verse had been overlooked, verse which in fact reveals him to have been a keen and intelligent reader of the Roman poet.<sup>2</sup>

Such examples could be extended almost indefinitely: Virgil was ubiquitous. Indeed, his very ubiquity places me in something of a quandary. To attempt to discuss, for example, ‘Vergil in the Middle Ages’ (to borrow the title of Comparetti’s now somewhat outdated, but still interesting, survey)<sup>3</sup> would be an undertaking almost as vast as contemplating writing

NEIL WRIGHT

the *Aeneid* itself. I shall, therefore, content myself with considering what may perhaps be some unfamiliar Medieval Latin texts, but ones in which we might well expect to detect Virgil's influence. Through this approach, I hope that we can arrive at a deeper understanding of the ways in which that influence worked. And, perhaps, I will also be able to demonstrate that the Middle Ages need not necessarily be viewed as a hell through which the literate needed, or need, to be guided by the *Aeneid*, much as Dante was led through the Inferno by Virgil.

In my home institution of Cambridge, Medieval Latin, under the able direction of Professor Peter Dronke, tended until recently to concentrate on lyric poetry and on philosophy. It would certainly not be difficult to illustrate Virgil's influence in both these fields, or for that matter on another which attracts much of my own scholarly endeavour, that of historiography. Here, however, I would like to turn to another area, one which will, I hope, have the added advantage of accessibility. I propose therefore to consider the influence of Virgil on Medieval epic poetry.

Having decided to limit this paper to a single genre, we are still by no means out of the woods. Vast amounts of epic verse were composed throughout the Medieval period, constituting a corpus immensely larger than the surviving Roman epics. If we are not to be swamped by this material, we need to impose on it further, more manageable boundaries. For this reason, I have elected to restrict my paper to the fecund period of the so-called twelfth-century renaissance.

Critics have been fond of cursing the Middle Ages with renaissances: in addition to the Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which is commonly held to have put an end to the Middle Ages, other renaissances can be encountered in the Carolingian period, in the tenth century, and in the twelfth. Whatever is the meaning of the rather over-worked term 'renaissance' (or 'renouatio' or call it what you will), it is certainly the case that the twelfth century saw in France, England and much of the rest of Europe an extraordinary outburst of creative energy, coupled with renewed enthusiasm for Classical texts and *auctores*.<sup>4</sup> This was so much the case that two decades in particular, the 1170s and 80s, saw the composition of no less than four major poems of epic scale and vision. These four poems are (not in order of composition): the *Anticlaudianus* by Alan of Lille;<sup>5</sup> the *Architrenius* by John of Hauvilla;<sup>6</sup> the *Bellum Troianum* or *Ylias* by Joseph of Exeter;<sup>7</sup> and the *Alexandreis* by Walter of Châtillon.<sup>8</sup>

All four of the authors of these poems knew Virgil's works intimately (as is amply demonstrated by *fontes* listed in the editions themselves). Like all their contemporaries, they had studied Virgil's poetry exhaustively at school; and their ready familiarity with it is everywhere apparent in the Virgilian diction, quotation and echoing with which their works are studded. Curiously enough, however, one of the most striking things about these four epics is how very un-Virgilian they are in conception and inspiration. To give some sense of this and of the poems' contents, they can briefly be characterised as follows.

The first two poems, the *Anticlaudianus* and the *Architrenius*, can, although their basic structure is narrative, best be described as being philosophical-moral in content. Most firmly rooted in twelfth-century Chartrian philosophy is Alan of Lille's *Anticlaudianus*, which deals with the creation of a new and perfect man, Wisdom's journey to God to obtain him a soul, and the new man's triumphant battle against the Vices which menace him. One of the major influences on Alan's poem is revealed in its title, which we might paraphrase as 'Against Claudian'. In particular, Alan had in mind Claudian's sardonic political invective *In Rufinum*.<sup>9</sup> Composed at the end of the fourth century, *In Rufinum* was very popular and influential in the Middle Ages; its victim, Rufinus, is depicted as an archvillain set on the world by the powers of Hell, whose council at the beginning of the work endured as one of its best-known passages. The basic plot of the *Anticlaudianus* is thus essentially an inversion of Claudian's poem, and the famous scene in Hell (which of course foreshadows Milton) is also closely imitated by Alan. Another important influence upon the *Anticlaudianus* was the *Psychomachia*, composed by Claudian's contemporary, Prudentius.<sup>10</sup> This was one of the most popular of the Christian Latin epics, using as it does the epic conventions of heroic battle to depict an allegorical struggle between Virtues and Vices within the soul of Man. On this poem the *Anticlaudianus* relies for its climax. In the case of Alan of Lille, then, Claudian and Prudentius can be seen to have been his prime literary models.

The second of our philosophical poems, the *Architrenius*, has a more satirical purpose and edge. Its hero, the 'arch-moaner' of its title, is an unhappy young man who wanders the world, encountering and lamenting excesses of all kinds. Finally he arrives at a paradise of philosophers and meets Nature herself, who marries him off to a maiden called Moderation, to live happily ever after. One obvious model for this poem, which contains

NEIL WRIGHT

a great deal more wit and humour than this simple summary would suggest, is the whimsical *De Nuptiis* of Martianus Capella, a handbook on the Seven Liberal Arts, cunningly disguised as an allegorical wedding between Mercury and Philology, and tricked out with fantastical rhetoric.<sup>11</sup> Among the Classical poets, the authors who are most consistently echoed and imitated by John of Hauvilla are Lucan and Juvenal, both writers whose satirical edge struck a chord with key preoccupations of the twelfth-century audience. One admiring reader of the *Architrenius* – who admittedly was probably one of John of Hauvilla’s pupils – commented that the poem’s only fault lay in its faultlessness:<sup>12</sup> certainly, we are here at a far remove from the spirit of Virgil’s dying wish that his unrevised epic be consigned to the flames.

Our second pair of twelfth-century epics are, on the surface at least, more conventional. The *Ylias* or *Bellum Troianum* by Joseph of Exeter is an account of the Trojan war, based not on Homer, whose original Greek text was virtually unknown to the West in the Middle Ages, but instead on an allegedly much more truthful account, supposedly written by a Trojan eyewitness, Dares the Phrygian, who along with Dictys of Crete (on the Greek side) provided medieval readers with much of their knowledge about Troy. Given the Trojan subject-matter of Joseph’s epic, we might well expect it to be consciously Virgilian. Yet that would be too obvious for the precocious Joseph. I cannot resist citing here a favourite passage from Joseph’s poem (*Ylias* 4.172–207). The passage in question is at first sight a conventional ephrasis of a beautiful woman, with Joseph seizing the opportunity to describe Helen of Troy, as so many other medieval texts love to do. At first all proceeds as expected, Helen being described in due order from top to toe. Suddenly, however, Joseph’s pen is transformed into a scalpel, as he literally cuts Helen open before our astonished eyes, ghoulishly praising her fine heart, lungs, and spleen. Yet it is by the liver, the seat of love, that all is revealed, for it is a monster that not even Tityos’s vulture can subdue. According to Marlowe, it was Helen’s face that launched a thousand ships. Joseph knows better: it was her liver, her own internal hell that brought a world to ruin. After that, it is not surprising to learn that Joseph’s favourite Classical model is Lucan, though in this case Joseph has managed to out-Lucan him. The *Bellum Troianum* is quite simply a *tour de force*, a twelfth-century Silver Latin epic which effortlessly takes up the baton from Lucan and from Statius.

The last of our four poems is Walter of Châtillon's *Alexandreis*. This is a Classicising epic, dealing not with that fantastic Alexander the Great whose myth is perpetuated in so many Medieval vernacular texts, but based primarily on the sober history of Quintus Curtius, which was probably written in the early imperial period. The *Alexandreis* too owes a heavy debt to Silver-Latin poetry, even though Walter evidently intended to challenge Virgil by supplying what was, in effect, the one great unwritten epic of Antiquity. When, for example, Alexander enters Babylon at the height of his triumph, Walter depicts his greatness as surpassing not that of Virgil's Aeneas, but rather of Lucan's Caesar and of Claudian's Honorius (*Alex.* 5.504–9). In terms of Walter's literary models, this is no mere lip-service. Lucan, for example, provides the inspiration for Walter's skilful handling of the opposition between Alexander and the Persian King Darius, which provides much of the tension at the centre of the epic, and which is explicitly constructed along similar lines to that between the demonic Caesar and the ineffectual but sympathetic Pompey which lies at the heart of Lucan's epic. Likewise, Claudian's council in Hell at the beginning of his *In Rufinum*, which we have already had cause to mention in connection with Alan of Lille's *Anticlaudianus*, also lies behind one of Walter's boldest conceits: in the *Alexandreis*, Alexander's end is hastened when his boast that a single world is not enough to conquer triggers the indignation of Nature: at her instigation, a Hellish council engineers Alexander's poisoning, because the Devil, misguided as always, labours under the misapprehension that the Macedonian will conquer the Underworld, and so blasphemously misreads prophecies of Christ's Harrowing of Hell (*Alex.* 10.1–167).

These summaries of the four epics, though brief, threaten to take us off in new directions. My point, however, is simple. To an audience which has cut its teeth on the *Aeneid*, and the *Aeneid* alone, these poems appear pretty alien. This observation can further be reinforced by remarking on their structure: not one is divided into the conventional twelve books of Virgil's poem. Metrically and stylistically, too, they are worlds apart from Virgil's practice. Despite their frequent echoing of the *Aeneid*, our four Medieval poets in fact exhibit a quite phenomenal understanding of the verse of Ovid, Lucan and Statius, and imitate their practice in so skilful a way that it verges on the uncanny. By now then it has, I hope, become clear that, for twelfth-century epic, Virgil was only one model among very many. Hence the question-mark in the title of my paper.

NEIL WRIGHT

I have not, however, forgotten that our prime concern here is with Virgil. I would, therefore, like to devote the rest of this paper to exploring the influence of the *Aeneid* on what is the most Virgilian of these epics, Walter of Châtillon's *Alexandreis*. The *Alexandreis* also merits our attention because, although all four of the epics I have mentioned were popular in the Middle Ages, Walter's poem was by far the most widely read. It immediately took its place amongst the Classics in the school curriculum, and its popularity is borne out by the vast number of surviving manuscripts. Its literary influence was also immense.

The *Alexandreis*, then, was widely read, as well as being more consciously Virgilian than the other twelfth-century epics with which we are concerned here. This Virgilianism manifests itself in several ways, one of the most striking of which is the taking over, in modified form, of certain motifs from the *Aeneid*. Walter is thus, to my knowledge, the only Medieval Latin poet who offers us a reworking of a central image of Virgil's *Aeneid*, the description of Aeneas's shield in Book Eight of that poem. Walter's reworking of this episode merits close attention, but since space is limited, I shall restrict myself here to summarising some of its salient points.

At the end of the second book of the *Alexandreis*, Walter describes in detail the shield of the Persian king, Darius (*Alex.* 2.494–544). What is depicted on it both complements and contrasts with the shield in *Aeneid* 8. Aeneas's shield is, as we all know, a window on the future, a physical symbol of the Rome-to-be, a burden which Aeneas shoulders and so links his own time to that of Virgil's Roman readers, whose past and present depended on his action. Darius by contrast bears a shield which records his people's past, the deeds of the rulers of Babylon and Persia, very largely as recorded in the Bible. Darius is thus saddled with representations of the fall of the tower of Babel, God's vengeance exacted for the sack of Jerusalem, and the conqueror Cyrus's ignominious end at the hands of a Scythian queen. Unlike Aeneas, poor Darius is thus marked out as yesterday's man, by means of a clever combination of the Virgilian shield-motif with the Persian king's role as a counterpart of Lucan's Pompey.

Nevertheless, in another sense Darius's shield does point forward to a contemporary audience much as Aeneas's did. By placing Darius and Alexander within the narrative of the Bible, and so of the history of salvation, Walter was able to bring them and their story closer to his own Christian

readers. Thereby he also added a further, complicating moral dimension: no less than Darius, Alexander will prove to be an autocratic ruler, no matter how attractive he may appear *en route*. Thus Darius's shield is not only an awful warning for him, but also for Alexander, and, for that matter for all kings: unless mortal power keeps within bounds, it will inevitably be cut down by a jealous God, a central motif of Walter's poem, which has been thoroughly explored by critics such as Kratz and Dionisotti.<sup>13</sup>

The Virgilian shield-motif is thus melted down, recast and reshaped under Walter's Vulcan hammer. The same, yet different, it is an icon which helps us to 'read' the *Alexandreis*. Instructive though the shield is, however, I would like to devote the remainder of this paper to a different passage, one in which we may examine Walter's reactions when he reworked not a description, but a narrative passage which could deliberately be made to evoke Virgilian ghosts and memories

Let us turn first to Walter's prose source, the following passage of Quintus Curtius (8.13, 12–16):<sup>14</sup>

*Erant in medio amne insulae crebrae, in quas et Indi et Macedones nantes, leuatis super capita armis, transibant. ibi leuia proelia conserebantur, et uterque rex paruae rei discrimine summae experiebatur euentum. ceterum in Macedonum exercitu temeritate et audacia insignes fuere Hegesimachus et Nicanor, nobiles iuuenes et perpetua partium felicitate ad spernendum omne periculum accensi; quis ducibus promptissimi iuuenum, lanceis modo armati, transnauere in insulam quam frequens hostis tenebat, multosque Indorum, nulla re melius quam audacia armati, interemerunt. abire cum gloria poterant, si unquam temeritas felix inueniret modum; sed dum superuenientes contemptim et superbe quoque exspectant, circumuenti ab eis qui occulti enauerant eminus obruti telis sunt. qui effugerant hostem aut impetu amnis ablati sunt aut uerticibus impliciti. eaque pugna multum Pori fiduciam erexit cuncta cernentis e ripa.*

This comparatively short passage relates an incident in Alexander's Indian campaign against Porus. As the opposing armies lined the Hydaspes, impromptu skirmishes took place on the islands in mid-river.

NEIL WRIGHT

In one of them, two high-born Macedonian youths, Hegesimachus and Nicanor, after initial success, paid the price of their rashness by being overwhelmed by the enemy. Every reader of Virgil will immediately appreciate the potential of this incident, noting how easily it might be moulded so as to recall the doomed bravery of Nisus and Euryalus's night-sally in Book Nine of the *Aeneid*. We may rightly ask, therefore, how Walter exploited this potential gold-mine.

Certainly he rose to the challenge, devoting over seventy lines of Book Nine of his epic to the episode (and remember his books contain on average only some five hundred lines). The passage (*Alex.* 9.71–147) runs as follows:

*Fluminis in medio terrae radicitus herens  
Insula multa fuit, quo uecta natantibus ulnis  
Arma ferens ibat ab utraque cohorte iuuentus,  
Expertura suas paruo certamine uires. 75  
Exercebat enim modice discrimine sortis  
Qui grauis instabat summi prelua casus.  
In castris Macedum, res non indigna relatu,  
Corporibus similes animisque fuere Nicanor  
Et Symachus, quos una dies, ut creditur, una 80  
Ediderat terris. par milicie labor ambos  
Parque ligabat amor. belli discrimen inibant  
In lucro damnoque pares, si saxa rotare  
Tormento iussi, si claudere menibus hostem,  
Frangere si muros, iunctis umbonibus ibant;  
Si frumentatum missi, si cingere fossis 85  
Obsessos, hostem noctu si fallere, siue  
Excubiis operam dare, si explorare latentes  
Vallibus insidias, quecumque pericula bellum  
Obiectasset eis, dubiae molimina sortis  
Corporis atque animi socia paritate ferebant. 90  
Horum igitur uirides animos animante iuuenta,  
Nescio quid magno conceptum pectore tandem  
Effutire parant, primusque 'uidesne, Nicanor,'  
Acer ait Symachus 'quam fluminis obice parui  
Hereat et nutet inuicti gloria regis? 95  
Audendum est aliquid quod nos, de margine ripae*



*Hostibus expulsis nostra uirtute, coronet  
 Victrici lauro, uel si quid fata minantur,  
 Induat aeterna nudatos corpore fama.'*  
*Vix ea, cum rapto sermone Nicanor 'et ipse* 100  
*Hec ego mente diu tacita dis testibus' inquit*  
*'Concepi, sed iam mora nulla feramur in hostes,*  
*Contenti leuibus armis.' nec plura locuti,*  
*Accincti gladiis rapidos mittuntur in amnes.*  
*Lancea pone natat. ducibus committitur istis* 105  
*Multa manus fluuio. quos ut uicina recepit*  
*Insula, confusis resonat clamoribus ether,*  
*Nam predicta frequens loca iam possederat hostis.*  
*Fit grauis occursus Indorum. grandinis instar*  
*Tela uolant multasque ferunt per inania mortes.* 110  
*At Symachus, qui forte prior transnauerat, hostes*  
*Educto mucrone petit, sociusque Nicanor*  
*Multo contendit uestire cadauere terram.*  
*Iamque satis factum gladiis, iam tela rubebant*  
*Marcia, purpureis distincto flumine guttis.* 115  
*Iam poterant iuuenes merita cum laude reuerti,*  
*Sed nullo contenta modo est temeraria uirtus.*  
*Dumque tryumphatis insultant hostibus, ecce*  
*Occulte subeunt plures morientibus Indi.*  
*Hic dolor, hic planctus, Graium Macedumque ruinae.* 120  
*Sternitur Andromachus, regum generosa propago,*  
*Occumbunt clari titulis ter quinque quirites,*  
*Quos longo genuit ereptos Grecia luctu.*  
*Soli restabant animo non sanguine fratres*  
*Graiugenae, uitae socii mortisque futurae.* 125  
*Quos ubi telorum pressit circumfluus ymber,*  
*Mentibus attonitis hesere quid esset agendum.*  
*Nam neque tela uiris neque lancea, quippe minutim*  
*Utraque fracta iacent. igitur que sola supersunt*  
*Arma, mouent gladios, raptimque feruntur in hostes.* 130  
*Sed reprimunt gressus teneris haerentia membris*  
*Spicula, nec Martis opus exercere dabatur*  
*Cominus. ergo uiri, quia iam suprema minari*  
*Fata uident, orant ut premoriatur uterque*

NEIL WRIGHT

*Occumbatque prior socioque superstite, cuius* 135  
*Cernere funus erat leto crudelius omni.*  
*Obiciunt igitur sibi se certantque uicissim*  
*Alterius differre necem. dum se obicit alter,*  
*Dum tamen hic illum dumque istum protegit ille,*  
*Ecce gyganteis abies excussa lacertis* 140  
*Aduolat et mediis conatibus artat utrumque*  
*Affigitque solo. sic indiuisa iuuentus*  
*Cuspide nexa iacet. sed nec diuturnus in ipsa*  
*Morte resedit amor. amplexus inter et inter*  
*Oscula decedit, moriensque sua sociique* 145  
*Morte perit duplici. resoluta corpore tandem*  
*Tendit ad Elysios angusto tramite campos.*

Obviously, this passage is too long to work through in detail; so I shall limit myself here to some general remarks to serve as a basis for further investigation. Colker, the editor of the *Alexandreis*, and Christensen – whose 1905 commentary remains an essential aid to the poem<sup>15</sup> – were quick to point out Walter’s debt to Virgil for the overall structure of the episode and for his depiction of the close bonding of the two warriors (whom he calls Nicanor and Symmachus), their debate before plunging into action, and the literary immortality which their rash heroism wins them.

However, as much as these similarities, it is the differences between the two poets which are striking. Not only is Walter’s version simply shorter than Virgil’s (the Nisus and Euryalus episode running to over three hundred lines), but Walter also omits many touches which our contemporary audience would see as characteristically Virgilian. When, for example, the youths are killed, Walter has nothing to match the pathos of Virgil’s subtly erotic comparison of the dying Euryalus to a flower cut down or a nodding poppy (*Aen.* 9.443–7) – and this despite the fact that Walter is elsewhere an enthusiastic imitator of the traditional epic simile. Similarly, although Walter is equally fond of emotive rhetoric, he does not round off the incident with a moving speech, like that of Euryalus’s distraught mother in the *Aeneid* (9.473–502). And although the basic tragedy of both pairs of warriors is that they go too far, Walter does not employ any narrative device like that of the helmet looted by Euryalus, whose gleam in the moonlight betrays him, so offering a concrete expres-

sion of the heroic code which is his undoing (9.371–4). Within its overall Virgilian structure, then, the tone of this episode is often far removed from the Roman poet’s famed empathy.

Indeed, other influences are at work. Take, for instance, Walter’s narrative of the death of the Macedonian heroes (in lines 131–147 above). In the *Aeneid*, it will be remembered, when Euryalus was captured, Nisus, still undetected, dispatched two Latins with his javelins; and when the captor’s sword is turned on Euryalus, his companion gives vent to the agonized cry, ‘*Me, me, adsum qui feci, in me conuertite ferrum, /o Rutuli*’ (*Aen.* 9.427–8). Walter took a hint from this altruistic self-sacrifice on Nisus’s part, but quite transformed it. In lines 134–9, we are treated to the spectacle of the devoted friends each striving to protect the other by interposing his own body, each eager to be the first to die so as not to witness the other’s death. The emotion is thereby heightened, but not without a suggestion of a manic contest of *politesse*, each party vying before some open door: ‘After you!’ ‘No, after you!’ The same mannered quality can also be found in the death itself (lines 140–6). It is for instance present in the language whereby their fatal union is marked by an emphatic chiasmus, which also links lines 144–5 in a symbolic enjambment: *amplexus inter et inter/Oscula*. This element of the contrived places us firmly in the world of post-Virgilian epic, that of Lucan and particularly of Ovid.

Of the many Ovidian parallels that could be cited, consider the following from *Metamorphoses* 12.419–28:

*(Auctor in incerto est) iaculum de parte sinistra*  
*Uenit et inferius, quam collo pectora subsunt,* 420  
*Cyllare, te fixit; paruo cor uulnere laesum*  
*Corpore cum toto post tela educta refrixit.*  
*Protinus Hylonome morientes excipit artus*  
*Inpositaque manu uulnus fouet oraque ad ora*  
*Admouet atque animae fugienti obsistere temptat;* 425  
*Ut uidet extinctum, dictis, quae clamor ad aures*  
*Arcuit ire meas, telo, quod inhaeserat illi*  
*Incubuit moriensque suum complexa maritum est.*

This passage comes from Ovid’s grotesque description of the battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs. Among the slain on the latter side are the tragic

NEIL WRIGHT

Cyllarus and his mate Hylonome, one of the loveliest she-centaurs, Ovid assures us, ever to have cantered through the pages of Latin poetry. When Cyllarus is fatally wounded, Hylonome joins him in death, their unity too being marked by pointed verbal repetition, and enjambment in lines 424–5: *oraque ad ora/Admouet*. In addition to the similar tone of the two passages, note too the manner in which both begin: death is dealt out by a sudden, impersonal weapon; hurled by giant arms in Walter (line 140, *gyganteis ... excussa lacertis*); thrown from the left by an unknown hand in Ovid (line 419, *de parte sinistra, auctor in incerto est*). In both passages, the effect is to inject added horror and pathos.

To return now to Walter, his giant-hurled spear pierces not just one of the Macedonians, but both, symbolically linking them forever in death. The effect is certainly striking, but not entirely original since it points us back to another post-Virgilian model. Walter was by no means the first to rework the Nisus-Euryalus episode. There is also a similar passage in Book Ten of Statius's *Thebaid*. In the course of a night-raid on the Theban camp, the warriors Dymas and Hoplaus, who are in effect Statius's Nisus and Euryalus, make an ill-fated attempt to recover the bodies of their fallen leaders. They are discovered as they return and, in the following passage, Hoplaus is killed by a spear which transfixes not only him but also grazes the body of Tydeus which he is carrying (*Theb.* 10.399–404):

*At non magnanimus curauit perdere iactus*  
*Aepytus, et fixo transuerberat Hoplea tergo* 400  
*Pendentisque etiam perstrinxit Tydeos armos.*  
*Labitur egregii nondum ducis immemor Hoplaus,*  
*Exspiratque tenens – felix, si corpus ademptum*  
*Nesciat – et saeuas talis descendit ad umbras.*

The similarity of context makes it evident that Walter also had this passage in mind.

There are, however, also important differences between Walter and Statius. Walter does not, for example, explicitly draw a parallel between his heroes and Nisus and Euryalus, or imagine both pairs of warriors meeting in the afterlife, as Statius does at the end of his version of the episode. Walter, though, does go much further than the Silver Latin poet, in having a single spear pierce and kill his two protagonists. The homosexual undercurrent in Virgil's story, with Nisus playing the concerned

and protective *erastes* to Euryalus's more inexperienced *eromenos*, is thus given a far more brutal climax. The shaft which links the dying Nicanor and Symmachus 'between embraces and kisses' clearly exploits the homosexual ambivalence implicit in much piercing and wounding in heroic battle: their death, skewered on a single spear, therefore brings a new and shocking physicality to the original Virgilian construct.

It is clear, then, from what has gone before that one level at which we can appreciate Walter's use of Virgil is as a kind of literary *contaminatio* (to borrow a phrase from Roman comedy), replaying, as it were, an episode from the *Aeneid*, but reshaping it in the light of later developments in Silver Latin epic. Is that, though, all that Walter is doing with his treatment of Nicanor and Symmachus? I would like now to investigate another dimension of their story, this time within the epic as a whole. An old objection, which used frequently to be raised against post-Virgilian epic, is that it is episodic and lacks unity. Such an attitude was never particularly helpful, and it often blinded critics to the strong thematic links which bound together constituent elements of the plot in Silver Latin epics.

With this in mind, let us return for a moment to Nisus and Euryalus, and their role in Book Nine of the *Aeneid*. That book consists of two main structural units: the failed mission of the two Trojans (176–502), and, contrasted with it, Turnus's equally unsuccessful attack on the Trojan camp (503–813). The failure of the Italians, it will be recalled, is ironically due to Turnus's own over-confidence. When he has forced his way into the camp, he is carried away by his own blood-lust, and hurls himself on in a typically Homeric *aristeia*. By failing to open the gate for his troops, he loses his best chance of defeating the Trojans, whose last day, Virgil stresses, it could well have been (*Ultimus ille dies bello gentique fuisset*, 9.759). Instead, Turnus plunges on in his *furor*, is eventually cornered by cooler-headed adversaries, and can save himself only by leaping, like Horatius, into the Tiber. Turnus's failure through this excess is thus thematically linked with that of Nisus and Euryalus, who are undone by lingering too long at the scene of their slaughter and by Euryalus's over-confidence in taking the helmet whose glint will betray him. Weighed against the more responsible leadership manifested by Aeneas in his proto-Roman guise, all three heroes are found wanting.

I stress the link between these two episodes because it also has important implications for the structure of the Ninth Book of Walter of Châtillon's epic. Later in the same Book, Walter relates Alexander's

NEIL WRIGHT

confrontation with the Malli, or Sudrae as he calls them, following Curtius. The incident is a well-known one: when Alexander finds himself alone on the enemy walls after a scaling-ladder breaks, he does not retreat, but leaps down into the city to face the entire population single-handed. He is pressed to his limits, only being rescued when his men finally burst in, and not before he has been seriously wounded by an arrow – a wound which historical commentators see as a contributory factor in Alexander's early death. Walter gives this episode too a prominent place in his poem, devoting well over a hundred lines to it (9.341–500).

Now, having been alerted to the influence of Book Nine of the *Aeneid* earlier in Walter's own Book Nine, it is difficult not to be struck by the similarities which Alexander's leap into the city of the Sudrae and his narrow escape bear to Turnus's experiences in the Trojan camp. Indeed, even if this response were not immediately triggered by the parallels between Nicanor and Symmachus and Nisus and Euryalus, Walter gives his readers another clue within the Sudrae episode itself. In the following passage, Alexander nears exhaustion, overwhelmed by a hail of missiles, his helmet broken, and his knees giving way beneath him (*Alex.* 9.391–5):

*Sed clipeum iam missilium perfoderat imber,  
Fractaque plangebatur saxorum turbine cassis.  
Lubrica succiderant genua et labefacta laboris  
Pondere continui uix sustentare ualebant  
Egregium corpus.*

The *locus classicus* for such a description of the warrior *in extremis* in Latin epic is, of course, Virgil's similar depiction of the plight of Turnus when cornered in the Trojan camp (*Aen.* 9.806–14):

*Ergo nec clipeo iuuenis subsistere tantum  
Nec dextra ualet, iniectis sic undique telis  
Obruitur. strepit adsiduo caua tempora circum  
Tinnitu galea et saxis solida aera fatiscunt  
Discussaeque iubae, capiti nec sufficit umbo  
Ictibus; ingeminant hastis et Troes et ipse  
Fulmineus Mnestheus. tum toto corpore sudor  
Liquitur et piceum (nec respirare potestas)  
Flumen agit, fessos quatit aeger anhelitus artus.* 810

These two passages constitute a good example of what I would term conscious *variatio* on Walter's part, in that he evidently evokes his Virgilian model through the similarity of context, but is careful never to echo Virgil's diction explicitly (as you can see by comparing the passages), and introduces characteristically medieval wordplay at one point (9.393–4, *labefacta laboris pondere*). These similar descriptions of exhaustion in battle thus reinforce the parallel between Alexander and Turnus, whilst at the same time Walter's verbal modifications also subtly encourage the reader to explore both similarity and difference.

Why does Walter draw this parallel? What view does he take of Alexander's leap into the enemy city? At one point, in the authorial voice, he poses the question – was the king's action brave or rash? – only to come up with the answer that it was both brave and rash (*Alex.* 9.371–3):

*Queritur an fortis facto an temerarius isto  
Rex fuerit, sed si contraria iungere curas,  
Et fortis fuit et facto temerarius isto.*

At first sight, this appears irritatingly like Walter having his cake and eating it. However, one model for framing his question in this way can be found when Virgil in the *Eclogues* archly wonders whether Medea or Amor was more responsible for the killing of her children (in *Eclogue* 7.47–50):

*Saeuus amor docuit natorum sanguine matrem  
Commaculare manus; crudelis tu quoque mater.  
Crudelis mater magis, an puer improbus ille?  
Improbus ille puer; crudelis tu quoque mater.*

And, as we have perhaps come to expect by now, an even closer parallel is provided by Ovid, who depicts Europa's father as being simultaneously both pious and wicked in exiling Cadmus (*Met.* 3.3–5):

*Cum pater ignarus Cadmo perquirere raptam  
Imperat et poenam, si non inuenerit, addit  
Exilium, facto pius et sceleratus eodem.*

NEIL WRIGHT

Passages like these account, then, for the tone of Walter's question. All the same, the apparent ambivalence of Walter's attitude to his hero is considerably undermined if viewed in the light of the Virgilian allusions we have been discussing. Turnus's escapade in the Trojan camp was his great missed opportunity, missed through his own selfish blood-lust. The parallel, if recognised, certainly tips the scales of our sympathy away from Walter's Alexander.

These similarities between Alexander and Turnus bring us face to face with one of the central problems of Walter's epic: how are we to read his hero? On the positive side, Alexander is always brave and courteous. By means of Biblical parallels, Walter also makes it clear that Alexander has a part to play in the history of salvation, and hence that he can often legitimately be viewed as God's agent punishing the wicked on earth. Moreover, Alexander's campaigns in the East had a special significance for Walter's twelfth-century audience. The poem was written less than eighty years after the successful conclusion of the First Crusade, and in the decade before the Third Crusade was to set off.<sup>16</sup> Alexander, then, can be seen as a kind of proto-crusader whose campaigns justify the West's assaults on the East. Linked with this role is that of Alexander as a strong ruler, whom Walter can offer as a model to his own King of France. The *Alexandreis* can thus be seen as akin to the didactic 'Mirrors for Princes' that were so frequently written in the Middle Ages for the instruction of royalty. Indeed, it should not be forgotten in this connection that Walter filled a gap in his narrative sources by devoting much of the First Book of his epic to Aristotle's teaching of the young Alexander to fit him for his regal future (*Alex.* 1.59–183).

There is, however, a debit side. Alexander is a ruthless conqueror whose ambition knows no bounds. After his Persian wars, which might be seen as justified, Alexander has no compunction about attacking peoples who have done him no harm and live in peace. Contrary to being always God's agent, he is also explicitly characterised as the hammer, or scourge, or destruction of the world.<sup>17</sup> Immediately after the sack of the city of the Sudrae in retaliation for Alexander's wound, Walter relates his hero's hubristic boast that one world is not enough to conquer.<sup>18</sup> For Walter, it is that boast which brings about Alexander's ruin at the hands of a vengeful Nature and her hellish allies. Alexander is thus a dynamo that threatens to destroy everything by its own energy. Finally, on his death-bed, Alexander imagines that he is being summoned by God to lead Heaven's forces



in some renewed Gigantomachy. His last words, '*Inuitus ad regna trahor*', 'I am being dragged unwillingly to rule in Heaven' (*Alex.* 10.417), constitute, in the context of Christian Latin epic, the very apotheosis of blasphemous megalomania.

Faced with this dichotomy, critics have tended to come down on one side or the other. They stress Alexander's virtues, but play down his faults; or are embarrassed by the frequent nobility of a ruler they prefer to cast as a monster. Some even castigate Walter for inconsistency or carelessness.<sup>19</sup> What they are surely missing is that the ambiguities of Alexander's character have been carefully written into his epic by Walter. Above all, the *Alexandreis* is a meditation of the possibilities and limitations of heroism, and so also constitutes, if you will, an exploration of the collocation, *arma uirumque*, which famously begins Virgil's epic and is central to his poem. Indeed, one way of approaching the *Aeneid* is as a testing, puzzling poem, forever drawing the reader on from one interpretation to another and perhaps back again. Certainly, its central character, Aeneas, is by no means simply drawn. His actions and motives have attracted the curiosity and attention of generations of readers and critics, and will continue to do so. The complexity of the character of Alexander, which also lies at the heart of Walter's epic, can, then, be viewed as another, subtle indication of his Virgilianism. Walter emerges as an intelligent reader of the *Aeneid*, as well as simply a Virgilian imitator.

Reference to heroism and its limitations also returns us neatly to the episode of Nicanor and Symmachus, with which we began. What I did not remark at the outset is that it is comparatively unusual for Walter to allow characters other than Alexander and his other main protagonists to occupy centre-stage for any length of time, as these Macedonian youths do. Once we appreciate their links with the flawed heroism not only of Nisus and Euryalus, but also of Turnus and of Alexander himself, we can see why Walter allowed them to do so. It is not simply that Walter saw in his source a good opportunity to replay a familiar Virgilian passage. Rather the Nisus and Euryalus episode dealt with a question which was pivotal to Walter's epic. As Nisus asks his companion (*Aen.* 9.184–5):

*'dine hunc ardorem mentibus addunt,  
Euryale, an sua cuique deus fit dira cupido?'*

NEIL WRIGHT

That is the question which every reader of the *Alexandreis* must answer for themselves.

Let me end by posing one key question: why should anybody want to read Medieval Latin epics? My own answer, as a committed medievalist, must be that they are intrinsically interesting in their own right. But I hope I have also demonstrated something which more and more medievalists and Classicists have come to realise, namely that the medieval epics do not exist apart from their Classical antecedents; rather the two are in a state of symbiosis and dialogue. To return for a moment to Walter of Châtillon's striking, and perhaps central, image of Darius's shield, I suggested that its symbolic functions are not limited to Darius alone, but that it is also a mirror in which Alexander's fate and place in the scheme of things can be glimpsed. We can view the medieval epics in the same way, forever reflecting their authors' reading of Virgil and the Classics and casting new light on it. As authors and readers, the medieval poets helped to shape our reception of the Classics, and we ignore them at our peril. An image much beloved by twelfth-century writers, and most famously cited by John of Salisbury, was to see themselves as dwarves perched on giants' shoulders, and so able to see just a little further. Likewise, the medieval poets themselves can afford us a further insight into Classical texts, and, if we forget whose shoulders we are perched on, we may well be in danger of a fall.

*Girton College, Cambridge*

NEIL WRIGHT

### Notes

1. For Gregory's reading in general (and knowledge of Virgil in particular), see M. Bonnet, *Le latin de Grégoire de Tours* (Paris, 1890) 48–76.
2. N. Wright, 'Bede and Vergil,' *Romanobarbarica* 6 (1981/2) 361–79.
3. D. Comparetti, *Vergil in the Middle Ages* (London, 1895).
4. A still useful survey is C.H. Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1928).
5. Ed. R. Bossuat, *Alain de Lille, Anticlaudianus* (Paris, 1955); translated by J.J. Sheridan, *Anticlaudianus: or The good and perfect man* (Toronto, 1973).
6. Ed. P.G. Schmidt, *Johannes de Hauvilla, Architrenius* (München, 1974); Schmidt's text is reprinted with accompanying translation in W. Wetherbee, *Johannes de Hauvilla, Architrenius* (Cambridge, 1994).
7. Ed. L. Gompf, *Joseph Iscanus, Ilias* (Leiden, 1970); translated by G. Roberts, *The Iliad of Dares Phrygius* (Cape Town, 1970). There is also an edition and translation of the first three books of the poem by A.K. Bate, *Joseph of Exeter, The Trojan War I-III* (Warminster, 1986).

VIRGIL AND TWELFTH-CENTURY EPIC?

8. Ed. M.L. Colker, *Galteri de Castellione Alexandreis* (Padova, 1978); translated (into prose) by R.T. Pritchard, *Walter of Châtillon, The Alexandreis* (Toronto, 1986); and (into verse) by D. Townsend, *The Alexandreis of Walter of Châtillon. A Twelfth-Century Epic* (Philadelphia, 1996).
9. Ed. M. Platnauer, *Claudian* (2 vols, London, 1922) I.24–97.
10. Ed. H.J. Thomson, *Prudentius* (2 vols, London, 1949) I.274–343.
11. Ed. J. Willis, *Martianus Capella* (Leipzig, 1983).
12. *uitiosum esse illum librum eo solo quod nullum uersum contineat uitiosum*, Gervais of Melkley in his *Ars Poetica*; see Schmidt, *Johannes*, 10.
13. D.M. Kratz, *Mocking Epic: Waltharius, Alexandreis and the Problem of Christian Heroism* (Madrid, 1980) 61–155; and A.C. Dionisotti, ‘Walter of Châtillon and the Greeks’, in *Latin Poetry and the Classical Tradition. Essays in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, eds P. Godman & O. Murray (Oxford, 1990) 73–96.
14. Ed. J.C. Rolfe, *Quintus Curtius* (2 vols, London, 1946) II.340.
15. H. Christensen, *Das Alexanderlied Walters von Châtillon* (Halle a. S., 1905).
16. For a convincing reconsideration of the date of the poem, see Dionisotti (n. 13 above), 90–96.
17. For example, *fatalis malleus orbis* (8.338); *mundi fatale flagellum* (7.119); and *lues mundi* (6.1). A useful tool is H.E. Stiene & J. Grub, *Verskonkordanz zur Alexandreis des Walter von Châtillon* (Hildesheim, 1985).
18. *absque deorum/Ut loquar inuidia, nimis est angustus et orbis,|Et terrae tractus domino non sufficit uni.* (*Alex.* 9.563–5).
19. See, for instance, G. Cary, *The Medieval Alexander* (Cambridge, 1956) 173–4.

