

Painting Virgil: Victorian Choices

A paper given to the Virgil Society on 25 March 2000

From the Renaissance to the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Virgilian corpus inspired an extensive visual response.¹ Virgil is employed for both the illustration of narrative and the evocation of mood. The *Aeneid* becomes a narrative sourcebook for artists, and certain subjects or episodes, Dido and Aeneas in particular, acquire the status of stock imagery with or without specific reference to text. Rubens's *The Death of Dido* (c.1635–40: Louvre, Paris), depicts Dido, as recounted at the end of *Aeneid* 4 (642–3: *effera Dido/sanguineam volvens aciem*) seated on top of a pyre surmounted with her bridal bed, Aeneas's garments and effigy, and plunging Aeneas's sword into her own breast. At the same time, descriptive passages in the *Aeneid*, the *Eclogues* and the *Georgics* were translated into the genre of landscape painting. Many of Claude's imaginary landscapes present Virgilian associations and subjects. Likewise, Turner was prompted to envision his own Virgilian landscapes. *Dido Building Carthage* (c.1815: National Gallery, London), inspired by the bustling activity of Carthaginian citizens in *Aeneid* 1, was considered by the artist to be among his most successful works. A portrait tradition even gives us representations of the poet himself. In *'Tu Marcellus Eris'* an emotive painting by Ingres, painted in 1812, Virgil reads his *Aeneid* to the imperial family of Augustus, his wife, Livia, and sister, Octavia. As Virgil foretells Marcellus's death in book 6, Octavia (the mother of Marcellus) faints, falling into the arms of Augustus.

These representations by Rubens, Turner and Ingres are merely three examples from the many paintings which constitute an impressive Virgilian tradition in western art. However, although this tradition affirms the ideals of classical heritage and is sanctioned by the canonical

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high-art practices of the Renaissance, it is summarily rejected by painters in Victorian England. Virgilian subjects or allusions are rarely selected and, when selected, show few links with the familiar canon of imagery.

Although classical-subject painting was not a coherent movement in Victorian Britain, classical subjects and motifs were adopted by many artists working in different styles. Both highly acclaimed Academic painters – Frederic, Lord Leighton, Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Sir Edward Poynter – and those aligned with other schools – notably Pre-Raphaelite painters, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones – all sought classical subjects through sophisticated negotiations with ancient literary and archaeological source material. And while an idealized Hellenic world comprising Homer, mythology, Phidias and the Elgin marbles formed the impetus behind many classical-subject canvases, paintings of Rome, constructed largely from archaeological evidence and Latin poetry, constitute a significant and identifiable form of Victorian classicism. With few exceptions, however, painters of ancient Rome neglect Virgilian texts in favour of other Latin literary sources.

From the Renaissance onwards, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, like Virgil's *Aeneid*, was appropriated as a source book of narrative imagery. In the nineteenth century, representations of myth continue to play a major part in the artist's oeuvre: Victorian culture, rich in visual and literary mythological allusion, assumes, and in turn guarantees, a reading and viewing public familiar with the narratives of ancient myth. While some mythological paintings assume either a generic form of myth or allude to a specifically Greek source, many can be taken to have an Ovidian origin. One Ovidian metamorphosis that held a special appeal for the Victorian imagination is Galatea's transformation from statue to living woman. Edward Burne-Jones produced two series of four paintings on the subject. In the second painting of the second series, *The Hand Refrains* (1875–8: Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery), the sculptor Pygmalion admires his finished statue, gazing longingly at his own creation before the moment of metamorphosis when the marble will become living flesh.

The same myth appears on the Victorian stage in the form of W. S. Gilbert's comedy, *Pygmalion and Galatea*, performed at the Lyceum in 1884 with the young actress, Mary Anderson, in the lead. A contemporary writer reports the excitement with which Mary Anderson was greeted: 'just then the idol of London and drawing crowds to gaze upon her as *Galatea*, the living statue'.² In the 1890s living statues enjoyed a new

popularity in the form of entertainment on the music hall stage, and reached the height of their success in 1906 with the performance of 'La Milo' at the London Pavilion and 'Galatea, or La Statue Humaine' (better known as Miss Maude Odell) at the Palace Theatre of Varieties.

Pygmalion and Galatea represented only one of several Ovidian subjects which exercised a wide appeal. Renaissance artists had sought to capture the exact moment of metamorphosis as Daphne is transformed into a laurel tree, and by the Victorian period countless Daphnes still flee from their pursuing Apollos. In John William Waterhouse's *Apollo and Daphne* (1908: Private collection), the artist avoids the difficult representation of metamorphosis by showing Daphne enclosed in twisting branches.

Reference of a more specific kind to Latin literary texts is found in the visual treatment of Catullus. Lawrence Alma-Tadema's *Catullus at Lesbia's* (1865: Private collection) presents a biographical vignette of the poet. At the same time, the painting looks to Catullus 3, in which the poet laments the death of Lesbia's pet sparrow. What we are shown, then, in Alma-Tadema's revisionary depiction, is a Catullus arriving at Lesbia's salon clutching the dead bird in his own hand. Might the death of the sparrow in Catullus 3 signify the death of love and the end of the poet's affair? This, it would seem, is Alma-Tadema's construction. His is a desolate Catullus, evidently supplanted in Lesbia's affections by the two other men in the painting, presumably her new lovers.

In the Victorian age, Catullan subjects are common enough, both biographical and textual. Other instances include Alma-Tadema's *Lesbia Weeping over her Sparrow* (1866: Brigham Young University, Utah) and *Catullus Reading his Poems at Lesbia's House* (1870: Private collection) and Edward Poynter's *Lesbia and her Sparrow* (1907: Private collection). Even Frederic Leighton, who sought inspiration primarily from Greek literature and art, painted one Catullan subject. *Acme and Septimius* (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford) was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1868 with a catalogue quotation from Catullus 45:

Then gently bending back her head,
With that sweet mouth, so rosy red,
Upon his eyes she dropped a kiss,
Intoxicating him with bliss.

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Leighton chooses an excerpt not conspicuously informed by the familiar Catullan ribaldry or wit, which helped to inspire Alma-Tadema's depictions of Catullus and Lesbia. Furthermore, Leighton includes a particularly sentimentalized translation which elicited a suitably acerbic comment from Algernon Swinburne: 'The picture of Acme and Septimius is excellently illustrative of Mr Theodore Martin's verse; it is no wise illustrative of Catullus'³. It is nonetheless significant that even a painter usually driven by Hellenic inspirations includes one Catullan subject in his oeuvre.

Tibullus also generates a quota of biographical scenes. We have Alma-Tadema's *Tibullus at Delia's* (1866: Boston Museum of Fine Arts), Henry J Hudson's *Neaera Reading a Letter from Tibullus* (1893: Cartwright Hall, Bradford City Art Gallery) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Return of Tibullus to Delia* (1867: Private collection). Rossetti's painting illustrates the final stanza of Tibullus, *Elegies* 1.3 in which the poet envisions an idyllic return home to a faithful mistress.

Of all the Latin poets, it is actually Horace who is most often appropriated by Victorian artists, although, unlike Catullus and Tibullus, 'Horace' is not recreated in biographical terms. It is not Horace's life (real or assumed), but his poetry, and the *Odes* in particular, which stimulate the artistic imagination. In Victorian painting it is characteristic that Horatian text is used in the form of catalogue quotation. Usually unaccredited and often in the original Latin, such quotations were clearly designed for instant recognition by an educated audience.

Edward Poynter's *Chloe* (Private collection), for instance, was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1893 accompanied by the following catalogue quotation, line 10 from *Odes* 3. 9:

Dulcis docta modos et citharae sciens

A nineteenth-century translation reads:

Skilled in notes of dulcet song and the science of the lute.⁴

In the Horatian context, the words constitute a tangent moment in the main narrative which takes the form of a dialogue between the poet and his ex-lover, Lydia, and recounts the growing passion they have for each other. Each playfully claims a new lover but both ultimately decide to renew their old love. Chloe is Lydia's rival, the poet's new love, whom he

will ultimately cast aside. In the line quoted – *Dulcis docta modos et citharae sciens* – Horace describes Chloe’s talents. Accordingly, Poynter shows her holding a *tibia* while her *cithara* rests beside her.

On six separate occasions, Poynter selected lines from Horace’s *Odes* as catalogue quotations to accompany six of his paintings. Indeed, Horatian quotations become so commonplace that in one instance the art critic F. G. Stephens selected his own lines to accompany a painting by Leighton. Although *Whispers*, a painting of two lovers seated on a bench, appeared at the Royal Academy in 1881 without any appended verse, Stephens described it in the *Athenaeum* as ‘an illustration of Horace’s well-known line, *Lenesque sub noctem susurri*’⁵ – ‘soft whispers as darkness falls’ (*Odes* 1. 9. 19). In a similar vein, a critic writing in the *Art Journal* in 1883, offers speculative identification of the various men and women from Alma-Tadema’s paintings with the assertion: ‘we name [them] from the *Odes* of Horace.’⁶

A more unexpected use of Horatian text comes in the form of an inscription within the canvas. Alma-Tadema’s *Bacchante* (1907: Private collection) displays a golden-haired bacchant gazing at the viewer through heavy-lidded eyes. An architectural inscription running along the top of the canvas is obscured by a statue of Dionysus and abruptly cut off on either side. Nevertheless, it can be identified as a sequence of verse from *Odes* 3. 25, lines 18–20:

... *dulce periculum est,*
O Lenaeae, sequi deum
cingentem viridi tempora pampino.

and translated as:

... Oh, how perilously sweet
 ’Tis to follow thee, Lenaeus,
 Thee the god who wreathes his temples with the vine-leaf
 For his crown.⁷

Horace is comparing poetic inspiration to Dionysiac frenzy. His piquant summation of the pleasure and danger of Dionysiac worship alerts us to the potential threat of Alma-Tadema’s bacchante, surely an alluring *femme fatale* who is the ‘*dulce periculum*’ here.

Horace's influence on Victorian painters is ubiquitous, and on one occasion, indeed, calls forth a textual-biographical image, in the shape of John Collier's *Horace and Lydia* (1924: Private collection). This painting, like Alma-Tadema's *Catullus at Lesbia's* completed nearly fifty years earlier, shows poet and lover in a Pompeian-type domestic setting.

The Victorian use of Latin poetry derives, in part, from the work of the French Néo-Grec painters who, in the mid-nineteenth century, developed historical genre painting by representing antique themes, not as exalted deeds and moral *exempla* as in neo-classical history painting, but as daily life within precise archaeological settings. Genre scenes included biographical studies of Latin poets such as Charles-François Jalabert's *Virgil, Horace and Varius at the House of Maecenas* (1844–6: Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nîmes). Significantly, it is Virgil who declaims his poetry to his fellow poets and their illustrious patron.

Yet the classical-biographical genre in Victorian Britain excludes Virgil. In Victorian painting there is no Virgilian counterpart to the imaginary scenes from the life of Catullus and Tibullus, or (even) Horace. Strikingly, the Victorian biographical tradition even admits the comparatively obscure figure of Gallus in Alma-Tadema's *The Poet Gallus Dreaming* (1892: Private collection). Although virtually nothing of Gallus's work survives, a popular-educated interest in the poet had been fostered by W.A. Becker's imaginative description of his life, downfall and suicide in *Gallus or Roman Scenes of the Time of Augustus*. Published in Leipzig in 1838, Becker's work was soon translated into English and reprinted many times throughout the Victorian period.

In Victorian painting, it is essentially the witty, urbane and seemingly carefree world of Latin love poetry that appealed to the re-creators of Roman life. Catullus, Tibullus and Horace are all depicted enjoying the pleasures of urban society. Gallus is placed high up on a marble terrace overlooking the Mediterranean sea, in a setting which can be identified as the Bay of Naples, a playground for the rich and famous from the early Empire. The wealthy built spectacular *villae maritimae* daringly placed on the edges of cliffs along the bay. Becker even describes Gallus's visit to the seaside resort of Baiae, where he enjoys a pampered and leisured existence. The martial-heroic *Aeneid*, the elusive-Arcadian *Eclogues* and the often austere rural *Georgics* are, by contrast, far removed from such a Rome. Ancient biographical sources, too, give painters little incentive. Of Virgil himself, the *Vita* of Donatus tells us: 'At Naples [he] was commonly



Figure 1 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Paolo and Francesca da Rimini* (1855: courtesy of the Tate, London 2001)

called Parthenias ... He spent most of his time in Campania or Sicily, where he could get away from people.' With no Lesbia, Delia or Lydia, Virgil presents a far less tantalizing subject.

The single attested biographical representation of the poet in Victorian painting is not the Virgil of late-Republican Rome but the Virgil of Dante. *Paolo and Francesca da Rimini* [Figure 1], an early painting by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, illustrates a scene from the *Inferno* albeit with one striking adjustment. Although Dante describes Virgil as 'master' and 'guide,' here a very young Virgil holds tightly on to the hand of the older Dante. In the centre of the canvas, Virgil holds his cloak up to his mouth while looking nervously at Paolo and Francesca, the two lovers buffeted in the winds. Rossetti's touching conception of Virgil as a timid boy is remarkable. Although the artist draws on something of Ingres's anxious young Virgil reading to the imperial family, he constructs an image of the poet quite at odds with the serious and high-minded author of the *Aeneid*, the 'mature,' central, archetypal figure (as T. S. Eliot was to portray him⁸) of all western poetry to come. Rossetti's image, surprisingly out of step with traditional Virgilian iconography, is nevertheless representative of the few Virgilian subjects and allusions in Victorian painting.

Greatly admired in the eighteenth century, Virgil's work, of course, occupied a somewhat lower status in the nineteenth. With the promotion of Greek scholarship he was often compared unfavourably with Homer

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and condemned for a lack of originality.⁹ In J. K. Huysmans's *Against Nature*, a work of decadent fiction written in *fin-de-siècle* France, Virgil is described as 'one of the most appalling pedants and one of the most deadly bores that Antiquity ever produced.'¹⁰ Horace, by contrast, is cited positively in the works of creative writers of the period. The English decadent poet Ernest Dowson uses lines from the *Odes* as titles of two of his poems,¹¹ while many more Horatian allusions are scattered throughout his works.¹²

One of the strongest condemnations of Virgil was from the German scholar, B. G. Niebuhr, who argued that the *Aeneid* was 'a complete failure' as, deriving from Greek epic traditions, it had lost touch with Italian origins. He writes:

Its contents were certainly national; yet it is scarcely credible that even Romans, if impartial, should have received sincere delight from these tales. We feel but too unpleasantly how little the poet succeeded in raising these shadowy names, for which he was forced to invent a character, into living beings, like the heroes of Homer.

Niebuhr continues:

Virgil, we may be sure, felt a misgiving, that all the foreign ornament with which he was decking his work, though it might enrich the poem, was not his own wealth, and that this would at last be perceived by posterity.¹³

Niebuhr not only contributed to a marked negativity that attached to the reputation of Virgil in general, but prompted a reassessment of the *Aeneid* in particular, through his reinterpretation of the legends surrounding the foundation of Rome. In his influential *History of Rome* (1811–12), Niebuhr challenged the traditional study of Roman history with a rejection of the historical validity of myth in relation to the origins of Rome. In Britain, Thomas Arnold's own *History of Rome* (1838) followed Niebuhr's approach to Roman legend.

This recategorization of the stories associated with the founding of Rome raised questions for practitioners of the visual arts. How were painters to approach the *Aeneid*: as history or as myth? For Victorian painters of classical subjects there was a clear distinction between the representation of

ancient history on the one hand, and ancient myth on the other. With the exclusion of traditional history painting from the works of the Néo-Grecs, subjects from a historical Rome were no longer accepted as ideals of exemplary action, and historical genre painting predominated. Mythological scenes, by contrast, stress connections with the Hellenic world: subjects derive from Greek textual sources, and figure-types and drapery from Greek sculpture. Greek themes themselves are touched with a characteristic Romantic longing for an unspecified past, a past which evokes dream-like visions of a mythological Golden Age. Far removed from the *Odyssey*, and symptomatically mediating Homer's antiquity through Dante,¹⁴ Tennyson's 'Ulysses' imagines Odysseus grown old and longing for one last adventure:

Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks;
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
Moans round with many voices.

Victorian painters convey the same sense of nostalgia and melancholic poignancy in their images of Greece as we find in Tennyson's response to Homer. Frederic Leighton's *Idyll* (1881–2: Private collection) derives its title from Theocritus (rather than from Virgil's *Eclogues*) and its figures from the Parthenon sculptures. At sunset two reclining women listen to the sound of a piper playing against a pastoral landscape. Leighton's construct mythologizes a de-historicized Greece.

Eighteenth and early nineteenth-century history paintings often chose subjects from Livy and from Virgil, but with the rejection of the old traditions of history painting, the *Aeneid* seems to have been dismissed by association with 'history' (and, perhaps, the *Eclogues* and the *Georgics* by association with the *Aeneid*). Furthermore, the *Aeneid*, even if re-categorised as myth, did not appeal to the Romantic representation of mythology in a golden age of Greece. It may indeed be that Virgil's identification of Trojans as proto-Romans, and his dismissive emphasis on guileful Greeks, played a part here. In any case the martial-heroic character of the *Aeneid* made it problematic. Robert Browning, friend and admirer of Frederic Leighton, is known to have suggested subjects for Leighton's paintings. One such suggestion was the slaying of Thamyris by Turnus from *Aeneid*

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12 (341). Such a painting was never attempted: Leighton, like many Victorian painters of Greece, eschewed scenes of epic combat in favour of Romanticized depictions of reflective and often regretful individuals.¹⁵ Even Tennyson in 'To Virgil: Written at the Request of the Mantuans for the Nineteenth Centenary of Virgil's Death' ultimately invokes Virgil as the poet of Empire. The nostalgia which permeates so much of his poetry is here uneasily situated in a longing for the glory of an imperial past:

Now thy Forum roars no longer,
Fallen every purple Caesar's dome
Though thine ocean-roll of rhythm
Sound for ever of Imperial Rome.

Virgilian material, then, does not fall readily into either of the two main Victorian representational modes of antiquity: Roman historical genre painting of urban social life, and Romanticized representations of Greek, or Greco-Roman, myth. The painter of Virgil, like Rossetti with his timid boy, was thus obliged to seek a new treatment of an old subject.

One Virgilian episode – often repeated on the pre-nineteenth-century canvas – which would seem likely to appeal to a Victorian sensibility, imbued with the individualism and melancholy of the Romantic imagination, is the personal tragedy of Dido. At the Royal Academy Summer exhibition the aesthetics of female abandonment and death were celebrated annually in the form of countless Ariadnes, Andromedas, Ophelias and Ladies of Shalott. Yet Dido was never among their number.

The pathos of Dido's personal grief is addressed in Purcell's opera, *Dido and Aeneas*, popular in the mid-nineteenth century, and in Berlioz's *The Trojans at Carthage*, first performed in 1863. In the visual arts there is one solitary Dido. The Yorkshire painter John Atkinson Grimshaw, better known for urban landscapes, street and dock scenes, did produce a small number of classical subjects in the 1870s and '80s including *Dido* [Figure 2]. Much like Grimshaw's other works, the setting is moonlit, misty and atmospheric.

Grimshaw's *Dido* stands offering flowers before a marble altar. Disrupted by some sound, she looks behind her into the darkness. It is evident that the the artist's intention is to illustrate lines 457–63 from *Aeneid* 4. A translation by William Morris runs as follows:



Figure 2 John Atkinson Grimshaw, *Dido* (1873: courtesy of Sotheby's)

Moreover, to her first-wed lord there stood amidst the house
A marble shrine, the which she loved with worship marvellous,
And bound it was with snowy wool and leafage of delight;
Thence heard she, when the earth was held in mirky hand of
night,
Strange sounds come forth, and words as if her husband called
his own.
And o'er and o'er his funeral song the screech-owl wailed alone,
And long his lamentable tale from high aloft was rolled.¹⁶

Grimshaw's Carthage is created from a varied assortment of visual sources: a Roman mosaic floor, a Pompeian-type bronze tripod, an Egyptianizing painted column, and an altar surmounted with vase and flowers suggestive of Victorian funerary monuments.

Archaeological accuracy was of prime concern for the historical genre painter, and a plausible recreation of the domestic settings of the late first century BC and the early first century AD could be easily gleaned from the excavation of private dwellings at Pompeii and Herculaneum. Paintings such as Alma-Tadema's *Catullus at Lesbia's* and Poynter's *Chloe* are validated by the use of literary and archaeological sources. By comparison, the



Figure 3 Edward Burne-Jones, *Souls on the Banks of the River Styx* (c.1873: private collection)

artist who strives to situate Dido in a pre-Roman Carthage is faced with an overwhelming lack of archaeological evidence. Is it perhaps the very elusiveness and non-Romanness of his composite that encourages Grimshaw to produce an image based on the *Aeneid* at all?

The same question, it may be, arises in connection with quite a different painting on a notional Virgilian theme. Edward Burne-Jones's *Souls on the Banks of the River Styx* [Figure 3] looks to Aeneas's journey to the Underworld as its subject. In 1873 Burne-Jones was commissioned by William Morris to produce designs for Morris's own translation of the *Aeneid* to be published in the form of an illuminated manuscript. This was a large and ambitious project which both men entered into with much excitement. Burne-Jones wrote to a friend in 1874: 'Every Sunday morning you may think of Morris and me together – he reads a book and I make drawings for a big Virgil he is writing – it is to be wonderful and put an end to printing.'¹⁷ The project was, however, never finished and Morris's translation was published in 1876 without the intended illustrations, while the manuscript



Figure 4 Edward Burne-Jones, *The Sirens* (c.1891–98: The John and Mabel Ringling Museum of Arts, Sarasota, Florida)

was eventually completed by other hands after it was bought in its unfinished state from Morris by Charles Fairfax Murray in 1890.

Nevertheless, Burne-Jones did complete a number of pencil studies and was prompted to produce the unfinished or preparatory oil sketch, *Souls on the Banks of the River Styx*. It depicts huddled groups of white figures against a dark, gloomy background and illustrates the passage in *Aeneid* 6 where Aeneas encounters souls in the Underworld whose bodies must await burial before they can cross the river. Morris's translation of lines 305–9 runs as follows:

Down thither rushed a mighty crowd, into the flood-side borne;
Mothers and men, and bodies there with all the life outworn
Of great-souled heroes; many a boy and never-wedded maid,
And youths before their father's eyes upon the death-bale laid:
As many as the leaves fall down in first of autumn cold.¹⁸

Intriguingly, the same memorable passage has surely influenced another seemingly unrelated painting, *The Sirens* of c.1875 [Figure 4], which shows a group of ghostly figures waiting on a desolate shore.



Figure 5 Edward Poynter, *A Roman Boat Race* (1889: courtesy of Sotheby's)

What Burne-Jones appears to have done in *The Sirens* is to construct a non-Virgilian subject from lines of the *Aeneid*. There are other Victorian paintings which point to Virgil more explicitly through the use of catalogue quotations, where, once again, the actual subjects are far removed from an illustration of text. Edward Poynter selected lines 115–16 from *Aeneid* 5 which he had printed in translation (Poynter incidentally chose Morris's translation) as catalogue quotation to accompany *A Roman Boat Race* [Figure 5]:

Four ships from all the fleet picked out, will first the race begin
With heavy oars.



Figure 6 Edward Burne-Jones, *The Depths of the Sea* (1886: private collection)

Although Poynter has chosen lines from the *Aeneid* which allude to the Trojan boat race, part of the funeral games to commemorate the death of his father, Anchises, the artist has neatly undercut the Virgilian heroic by effecting a transposition to the context of women spectators at a pleasure race in imperial Rome. The artist subverts the viewer's expectations by alluding to historical-mythological epic, but then produces a historical genre scene showing the frivolous enjoyments of a pleasure-seeking urban Rome.

Equally subversive is Burne-Jones's use of a Virgilian catalogue quotation to accompany *The Depths of the Sea* [Figure 6], a painting of a sea nymph clutching a drowning man as she greets the viewer with an enigmatic smile. The artist went to some pains to construct his setting. For the underwater effect he borrowed a tank from a fellow artist, Henry

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Holiday, who had it specially made for a painting of the Rhine maidens in Wagner's *Das Rheingold*. Holiday wrote in his reminiscences:

'I modelled the three nymphs, tinted them, and placed them in a large tank with a plate-glass front, filled with water coloured transparent blue-green. I also modelled rocks, and the effect was curiously natural. Burne-Jones borrowed my tank later when he painted his "Mermaid".'¹⁹

When shown at the Royal Academy in 1886, *The Depths of the Sea* received unanimous praise from the critics. George Bernard Shaw declared after seeing the painting: 'the rest of the exhibition is leather and prunella.'²⁰ The mermaid's expression provoked the most positive critical comment. F. G. Stephens, writing in the *Athenaeum*, described it as 'a marvel of wicked witchery', while the critic of *The Times* claimed that 'the strength of the picture is undoubtedly in the mermaid's face, which the artist has invested with a look of triumph that is neither human nor diabolic ... almost worthy of Leonardo da Vinci.'²¹ However, no critic, contemporary or modern, has commented on the quotation printed in Latin in the Academy catalogue, although it is surely this quotation that helps to unravel the mystery of the mermaid's enigmatic gaze. It reads as follows:

*Habes tota quod mente petisti,
Infelix.*

Seemingly from *Aeneid* 4, line 100, it translates, in the words of Morris:

That which all thine heart was set on thou hast found,
Unhappy one.

'Thou' could refer either to the sea nymph who clasps the dying youth or to the youth lured to his death. However, the Latin quotation itself is less than straightforward, as in the *Aeneid* the words following *petisti* are *Ardeat amans Dido* and not *Infelix*, which of course is the familiar epithet applied to Dido at various points throughout the *Aeneid*. The quotation, then, suggests that 'thou' is Dido. In Virgil's Latin, it is actually Venus. The first words are spoken by Juno to Venus, who tells the goddess of love that, as was her wish, Dido has fallen in love with Aeneas. Through the

inclusion of *infelix*, the lines are in effect associated with Dido and, through her, with love (the unrequited love of the Carthaginian queen for Aeneas) and death (her tragic death, which is the inevitable outcome). Returning to the painting, we see that the reconstituted Latin sequence illuminates the poignant plight of both the sea nymph, who has captured her youth only for him to die, and the youth, who has followed the nymph to the 'depths of the sea' only to gain his love in the arms of death.

Burne-Jones makes no mention of Dido in his quotation but through the epithet unquestionably conjures up her name and her plight. No less surprising than the manipulation of the Latin text is the use of Virgil to add mood and meaning to a painting of a mermaid or siren, an image more usually associated with Homer. The sirens are dangerous female predators whom Odysseus and his crew encounter in *Odyssey* 12. Although Homer says nothing of their appearance, the sirens are given a form by later literary and visual sources. Initially half-bird and half-human, they are gradually anthropomorphised and feminised until, by the late-antique and medieval period, they are fully human except for the addition of a fish's tail. Nineteenth-century sirens had become interchangeable with mermaids as *femmes fatales* who emerge from the water to lure unsuspecting men to their deaths. Nevertheless, many artists were keen to stress their sirens' Greek affinities through unmistakable illustrations of the *Odyssey* and the use of Homeric quotations. Burne-Jones, on the other hand, has wilfully rejected the Homeric text in favour of a Virgilian one, as he virtually had already in *The Sirens*, which he described himself as 'a sort of Sirenland – I don't know when or where – not Greek Sirens, but any sirens, anywhere, that lure on men to destruction.'²² As we have seen, if the painting suggests any source then it is Virgil's description of souls on the banks of the Styx.

Perhaps the one straightforward use of a Virgilian subject, and certainly a more conventional use of Virgilian text as appended to a canvas, is found in Alma-Tadema's *On the Road to the Temple of Ceres*. The painting, however, looks not to the *Aeneid*, but to Virgil's earlier work. It is accompanied by lines of verse from John Dryden's translation of the *Georgics*, this time not merely included in the accompanying exhibition catalogue, but printed on the picture's frame:

When Winter's rage abates, when cheerful Hours
Awake the Spring, and Spring awakes the Flow'rs,

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On the green Turf, thy careless Limbs display,
And celebrate the mighty Mother's day.
For then the Hills with pleasing Shades are crown'd,
And Sleeps are sweeter on the silken Ground:
With milder Beams the Sun securely shines;
Fat are the Lambs and luscious are the Wines.
Let ev'ry Swain adore her Pow'r Divine,
And Milk and Honey mix with sparkling Wine:
Let all the Quire of Clowns attend the show,
In long Procession, shouting as they go;
Invoking her to bless their yearly Stores,
Inviting Plenty to their crowded Floors.
Thus in the Spring, and thus in Summer's Heat,
Before the Sickles touch the ripening Wheat,
On *Ceres* call; and let the lab'ring Hind
With Oaken Wreaths his hollow Temples bind:
On *Ceres* let him call, and *Ceres* praise,
With uncouth Dances and with Country Lays.

The lines, from *Georgics* 1 (335–350 = Dryden 1.463–482), belong to a well-known passage celebrating spring, summer and harvest festivals. The painting shows a rural religious festival, in the shape of an informal procession of celebrants, and would seem faithful enough in its response to an agricultural poem. But the lines cited are not merely incidental to the painting; they constitute its immediate and central inspiration. Alma-Tadema is not usually noted for his depiction of movement and his figures often have a static quality. Art historians have observed that the leading female dancer here displays unusual vibrancy.²³ What they fail to note is the connection between this surprising animation and the verse inscription. The crucial phrase comes in the last line of the quotation: 'With uncouth dances and with country lays' – uncouth dances – *motus incompositos* – the very sound and rhythm of the words conveys a clumsy movement, which Alma-Tadema has translated into the image of a country girl dressed in a rough animal skin dancing with bare feet to the beat of a *tympanum*.

The Georgics, of course, also retells the Orpheus myth, a myth which inspired various European symbolist artists, for whom the poet's disembodied head, still singing as it floats down the river Hebrus, becomes a

potent symbol. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the river carries both lyre and head, and while Ovid's head only emits a piteous murmur, Virgil's pours out a passionate lament. T. S. Burt's 1883 translation of *Georgics* 4, lines 523–7, reads as follows:

But, even when the Aeagrian Hebrus bore
His head reft from its alabaster neck,
And roll'd it down the channel of the stream,
Its voice and tongue with fleeting breath still cried:
'Eurydice, wretched Eurydice!'
All the stream's banks repeat: 'Eurydice.'

Paintings of the myth by Gustave Moreau, Odilon Redon and Franz von Stuck all point us to the possibility of the poet's immortality through the representation of the lifeless head and the (Ovidian) lyre, and yet they all choose to show the poet's mouth firmly closed. Although it is Virgil who highlights the artistic possibilities of the scene, the painters derive their detail from Ovid's narrative. The British artist John William Waterhouse draws on the same subject, mood and detail as his European counterparts. *Nymphs Finding the Head of Orpheus* [Figure 7] is a sad, strange picture of two women seated on a rock gazing down at the head of the poet floating in the water below. Lyre and head are entangled with the poet's hair and, once again, his lips are closed to the Virgilian lament.

Conventional predilection for a Greek or Ovidian mythology and a historical-genre and mainly urban Rome combine with academic assaults on Virgil's reputation to ensure that conventional Virgilian iconography had become obsolete in the painting traditions of Victorian Britain. And yet, while there are virtually no illustrations of Virgilian narrative in the mould of Rubens's *Death of Dido* and Turner's *Dido Building Carthage*, artists still occasionally look to a Virgilian text – but essentially in an individualist spirit: for the Victorian artist, it seems, Virgil is known, but not revered; tacitly acknowledged, but then manipulated to suit the artist's purpose. Hence Rossetti represents Virgil as a timid boy, Poynter translates epic grandeur into frivolous pleasure, Burne-Jones conflates Virgilian and Homeric imagery and even boldly misquotes the *Aeneid*. If not quite a wholesale rewriting – as, say, Pound rewrites Propertius –



Figure 7: John William Waterhouse, *Nymphs Finding the Head of Orpheus* (1901: private collection)

these examples epitomise a distinctive kind of appropriation in which Virgil remains exemplary, yet is in no way sacrosanct.

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ROSEMARY BARROW

Notes

1. See Nigel Llewellyn, 'Virgil and the Visual Arts' in Charles Martindale, ed., *Virgil and his Influence* (Bristol, 1984) and M.J.H. Liversidge, 'Virgil in Art' in Charles Martindale, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil* (Cambridge, 1997).
2. W. Graham Robertson, *Time Was: The Reminiscences of W. Graham Robertson* (London, 1931): 98.
3. Algernon Swinburne, 'Notes on Some Pictures of 1868' in *Essays and Studies* (London, 1901): 361.
4. *The Odes and Epodes of Horace*, tr. Lord Lytton (London, 1872).

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5. *Athenaeum*, 30 April, 1881: 598.
6. 'The Works of Lawrence Alma-Tadema,' *Art Journal*, 1883: 66.
7. *The Odes and Epodes of Horace*, tr. Lord Lytton (London, 1872).
8. T. S. Eliot, 'What is a classic?' (1944) and 'Virgil and the Christian world' (1951), in *On Poetry and Poets* (London, 1957).
9. Norman Vance, *The Victorians and Ancient Rome* (Oxford, 1997): 134–9.
10. J. K. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, tr. Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth 1966) : 40, first publ. 1884. However, Des Essientes condemns all Latin writers until Lucan.
11. 'Vitae summa brevis spem nos vetat incohare longam' from *Odes* 1.4.15 and 'Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae' from *Odes* 4.1.3–4.
12. See Rowena Fowler, 'Ernest Dowson and the Classics,' *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 3 (1973): 243–52.
13. B. G. Niebuhr, *The History of Rome*, tr. J. C. Hare and C. Thirlwall (Cambridge, 1828), vol. 1: 166.
14. See W. B. Stanford, *The Ulysses Theme: a Study in the Adaptability of a Traditional Hero* (Oxford, 1954).
15. Although Norman Vance discovers a combination of Virgilian pathos and sense of epic destiny in Tennyson's *Idylls of the Kings*, see *The Victorians and Ancient Rome* (Oxford, 1997): 149–52.
16. *The Aeneids of Virgil: Done into English Verse by William Morris* (London, 1875).
17. Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, (London, 1904), vol. 2: 56.
18. *The Aeneids of Virgil: Done into English Verse by William Morris* (London, 1875).
19. Quoted in *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist-Dreamer* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1998), cat.119.
20. *The World*, 5 May 1886, quoted in Stanley Weintraub, *Bernard Shaw on the London Art Scene 1885–1950* (Pennsylvania, 1989): 103.
21. *The Times*, 8 May, 1886: 8.
22. Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, (London, 1904), vol 2: 222.
23. Vern Swanson, *The Biography and Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema* (London, 1990): 254; *Empires Restored, Elysium Revisited: The Art Of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema* (Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, Williamstown Massachusetts, 1991), cat. 21.

