

Virgil: Modern Classic

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‘Our classic, the classic of all Europe, is Virgil.’

T.S. Eliot, Presidential Address to the Virgil Society 1944¹

I’m not sure whether I had anything very precise in mind when I gave this paper the title ‘Virgil: modern classic’. Perhaps that it would be pleasing to have Virgil’s *Aeneid* made accessible to the general reader, in the way Orwell and Kafka are or like the films, TV and short stories I study in my academic work.

I came to Virgil through Literature not Language. Having read the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, I thought I’d look up the ‘third one’ and, after reading it once (in Robert Fitzgerald’s translation²), exclaimed on shutting the book: “This is the masterpiece of the world.”

My very first response to the *Aeneid* came, of course, before I’d read it, that is, by way of ill-informed reputation and prejudice. The *Aeneid* was ‘classical’, that is, ancient, stuffy, frigid as white polished stone. If it was Roman, it was probably stiff with militarism and dark with superstition (‘pagan’ was the term, wasn’t it?) and unlike modern Art, neither shocking and sensational nor critical and intelligent.

However, on reading it, I soon decided that what I didn’t want to do was reduce this text to our times. Find its relevance, or significance, certainly, but not by making Virgil One of Us - denying his Roman context, bypassing scholarship or making him a Christian or anti-colonialist. That said, one never reads without looking for one’s own significance in the work or reading it as a metaphor from which one can draw lessons for one’s time. Reading is a dialogue in which the work’s effects are not received without meanings and associations of one’s own being present. As Susanna Braund puts it, readers of Virgil (especially of Virgil) can’t help reading inside their epoch, but at least let us be ‘candid about the baggage that we bring to bear when we read the poem’.³

A ROMAN SHOSTAKOVICH?

After reading the *Aeneid* and reading about it, I found that the most pervasive interpretation of the text was that it was the Greatest Propaganda Poem ever written: advocacy for Roman Empire building, for invasion and conquest, using the legend of an adventurous ancestor. Behind the Trojan Aeneas and his journey to found a new people in Italy the Poet had portrayed a divinely sanctioned mission, Rome the result of Fate and Jupiter's wish, while giving the opponents of that mission (hostile Latins, Carthaginians, etc.) an effective voice. By showing a measure of pity for opponents, the poem didn't invalidate the colonising mission, but only made the final victory of Rome's ancestors inevitable though tinged with an unavoidable sadness. Then I discovered that the epic was said to bear another reading. Some scholar-critics argued that Virgil was something like a secret republican, opposed to Emperors and Empires, as the work had a saving ambiguity. It contained 'two voices', an Imperial one and another voice that subtly undermines it.⁴ Virgil was in fact a Shostakovich to the Roman Stalin.⁵

READING NOW

In this paper, I'm not going as far as either of these. Both these interpretations are themselves readings of the text as metaphor, as a story the significance of which is not at first obvious but must be explicated. Scholarship too is there to remind the reader or interpretative critic that a text has roots, that its meanings once belonged to other contexts. It is necessary - and fun - to seek out and be shown what meanings the text may have had for its original (and later) public. As I have read and re-read the poem, and continued to study works of scholarship, I became more and more interested in whether I could leave Virgil an Epic poet and a Roman (not make him One of Us) and still acknowledge the way the text - narrative, language, ideas - had affected me. Could the work connect with and even assist us in our modern condition? As Terry Eagleton⁶ has argued, new readers can produce new readings of a text's significance. I would only add that this need not mean rejecting what is known *about* the text, that is, scholarship.

This paper therefore starts from the idea that we can discuss a text both acknowledging it as a product of a particular ideological/social moment and interpreting its significance for our own purposes. Virgil's *Aeneid* is a 'universal' text not because it is free of history, but because it can be read as more than a document of Ancient Rome. It tells a tale of any great human endeavour fully seen as not without pain, difficulty or risk. Furthermore, the wisdom of the *Aeneid* goes beyond notions of original sin or automatic progress; in other words, it has a message for us today who have been failed by both pessimism and optimism, dogma and technology.

MISTAKES WILL HAPPEN

The traditional summary of what the *Aeneid* promotes is *pietas* - obligatory conduct to ancestors, parents, benefactors, the *patria* and to a Father in heaven. However, if asked what I'd found Virgil to be *against*, I'd say Thoughtlessness, meaning absence of mind, not only as in *furor* (frenzy and madness), but also in lack of attention to the necessary. It's what Orpheus exhibits in *Georgics* 4.485-505. Orpheus is leading his love Eurydice out of the World of the Dead but only if he doesn't give in to the temptation to look back at her. Alas, he can't resist and turns round. 'What possessed you?' Eurydice cries out as she disappears back to the Underworld.

Different kinds of failure to think occur all through the *Aeneid*, as passion and impulse and as *inattention*, in the form of mistakenness for example (especially the making of assumptions). Thoughtlessness too can cover an attachment to stupefying subjectivity, not as impulse but as a continuous lack of seeing things, including oneself, from the outside. This practice, though humanly understandable, is better replaced with knowledge of the conditions (whether of forces inside or outside us).

The antipathy to thoughtless action, which can be found throughout his works, is part of Virgil's promotion of *pietas*, anti-individualism in thought. The last two centuries of the Roman Republic had seen a growth of individualism, a decline in traditionalism. Religious ideas (stoicism), social crises, expansion of Empire and trade, and the reliance on Great Individuals, such as military leaders like Pompey, had weakened traditional allegiance to the State. From 107 BCE, the reduction in property qualifications for membership of the Army alone had weakened soldiers' loyalty to the polity rather than to their own commanders. One such commander, Julius Caesar, had shown just how much an individual, if skilled and contemptuous of boundaries, loyal to his troops and their enrichment, could antagonise and frighten the traditional order and its embodiment the Senate. The next Caesar, the *Princeps* Octavian, did in fact come to an accommodation with the traditional order (whose high members, the Senate, had to renounce their supremacy) while achieving as much if not more real personal control as his uncle Julius ever practised as dictator. Whether Virgil's epic played any part in encouraging this solution, we cannot know, but there is much in the work to demonstrate that he seeks to show that thoughtless self-assertion (either against or in defence of the state) is not enough.

If deliberation is to be valued, this doesn't make the *Aeneid* cool or callous. Virtually every commentator has noticed the feeling for suffering individuals the text exhibits. Indeed, I have never read a work where the characters make so many *mistakes*, which doesn't lay them open to disparagement. This is because their mistakes are not ones of prejudice but of misreading, often of events caused by the Gods. As a polytheist, Virgil is telling a story not of God's Judgement but of Gods acting out of their own impulsiveness. Juno, Venus and Apollo all play capricious parts in Aeneas's and the Trojans' hardship.

For example in Book II, when the Trojans find the wooden horse outside the city, what convinces them to take it in is their mistaken interpretation of the 'sign' that follows. Laocoon, a priest of Troy, warns them against trusting this gift from their enemies, but Apollo sends two large sea snakes to murder him and his sons. This horrible sight is then interpreted by the Trojans as a sign that a God is offended at any disrespect shown to the effigy. A Greek spy Sinon further convinces them that the Horse is only a statue. They are inclined to believe him because of his claims that he too is a victim of Greek persecution.

So, unlike Shakespeare's Macbeth seduced by the Witches' prophesy because of his personal vanity, his 'sin', the Trojans believe the Horse is harmless out of respect for cosmic forces and their generosity towards the victim. One might even conceive of oneself falling for the same fraud. Though we may not want to lose the concept of a flaw in personality (say, in a Freudian sense), we can still distinguish between Flaws and Errors, Accidents and Entrapments. This is objectivity, distinguishing what outside forces as well as what ideas lead us to misfortune. Virgil shares this with many artists of the 20th century. As John Berger comments while discussing Picasso, the

typical genius of the twentieth century is ‘almost anonymous: they are quiet, consistent, controlled and very conscious of the power of the forces outside themselves’.⁷ Berger cites Brecht and Bartok. One might add Kafka, Pinter, Duchamp, but, unlike some of these, the *Aeneid* combines objectivity with empathy.

FIGURES OF SPEECH

Empathy is more than feeling sympathy for a character: it is being let in on their emotions. Here is an example from the *Aeneid*. The Greeks have now returned and have invaded the city. In the mêlée, a Greek, Androgeos, comes across a party of defending Trojans in a street. In the fog of war, he mistakes them for fellow-Greeks. He then realises his error and the text describes him as stepping back ‘*as one who has crushed a serpent unseen...and in sudden terror shrinks back...*’ (Aen. 2.370-82).⁸ Now I would argue that this simile, in alluding to a comparable experience of surprise and shock, assists us in feeling what someone in Androgeos’s position might feel. Each line and further description of the situation carries the reader along into the danger and pathos of this wrong step. Virgilian similes go deeper and last longer than the work of comparable writers. They seem designed to counteract the *inattention* of the reader or hearer.

As scholars have pointed out however, Virgil is not known for being original (originating) in his figures of speech. It’s a commonplace to say that the *Aeneid* contains what we now call intertextuality, the use of sources, allusions and archetypes that one author takes from another or from the cultural tradition (when these can be traced). Lyne⁹ has drawn attention to a significant example of this: the metaphor at Aen. 2.756-9 is obviously related to Homer *Iliad* 23.182. In Homer, Achilles refuses to cremate respectfully his dead foe Hector and addresses his dead companion Patroclus alongside twelve fallen Trojans: ‘them the fire eats at the same time; but Hector I shall not give to the fire to devour, but to the dogs’. The metaphor here is of fire’s digestive power. This is a familiar idea, but in the *Aeneid* passage, the word ‘fire’ *ignis* is conjoined with the word *edax* ‘greedy’. This ‘greedy fire’ occurs when Aeneas is searching for his wife Creusa from whom he has been separated as Troy is sacked. He returns to their house to look for her. Suddenly the building goes up in flame, set on fire in fact by the Greeks. Lyne adds the comment that, prior to the poem, the word *edax* appears only in stage comedies (like Plautus) and in prose not poetry. Virgil ‘exploits a word from the living tongue to jerk some life into the old metaphor’. Also worth considering is that the whole of Book II, where this passage occurs, is being narrated by Aeneas himself. He is addressing the court of Dido about the fall of his city.

How apt then is the line about the greed of the fire. Aeneas remembers how it consumed, devoured his house with gusto to the very roof. The metaphor is true both to Aeneas’s shock and to the impressiveness and speed of wind-driven flames.

This is not merely stealing or borrowing, this is a development. Virgil takes up Homer’s phrase of the fire that eats and puts it to a use where it is doubly apt - apt to this destructive moment in Troy’s end and to Aeneas’s shock and memory of that shock. This rejuvenation of a used metaphor is characteristic of the poem. One might indeed turn Virgil into a verb, that is, *to Virgilise*, to take something, whether it be a figure of speech, mythical tale or ideological task, and ‘make it over’, make it more profound, refine and create it afresh, find its aptest use and a new function together.

The idea of making new, or freshening perception, seeing something more clearly from a new angle, ‘making strange’ as Brecht would say,¹⁰ is one of our most modern and modernist projects. But in this freshening of old material, the *Aeneid* is not ‘original’ either. The poet may well have taken it from Catullus, the Roman poet whose *Peleus and Thetis* poem (No 64) blends elegy and epic, injecting conventionally descriptive and mythical Hellenistic poetry with drama and a meditation on lost love. Indeed one recent critic suggests that the characters Ariadne and Theseus ‘stand in’ for the historical persons of Catullus and his lover *Lesbia*.¹¹ Before Virgil, Catullus shows a way in which literary myth and ordinary human concerns can coexist, as well as writing fine poetic narrative such as when oarsmen see the faces of sea-nymphs looking up at them from the waves.

Virgil then doesn’t worry about originality, a message for us who both disclaim originality (through pastiche) and worry about lacking it (nothing new for us to say now). Of all writers, he is the Poet of those who come after. The *Aeneid* is Post-Homer but that doesn’t make it pastiche. Many writers since at least the 1960s may feel they Come After too. We come after the Great Moderns, and the Great Modernisation of our world, hence Post-Modern. Virgil shows a way of being a Post-Poet.

Apart from its rejuvenations, the *Aeneid* is based on a particular relation between Past and Future. The legend tells of Aeneas founding the people who will result in Rome. In the poem this destiny is known only to Jupiter (who approves and assists it) but we the audience ‘know it’ as well, that is, know of Rome and the Empire (and after). We may experience the struggle to get there with Aeneas but we read it (or hear it as the first Roman audience did) from, as it were, its future. We are ‘knowing’ in relation to this text, not only as to the allusions and by virtue of our superior position of understanding (we recognise a character’s mistakes, for example) but as people looking back from the result. Most stories are narrated (and read) in the past tense, ‘this happened some time in the past.’ With the *Aeneid*, the past in the story is the past of all of us who have been affected by Rome.

Is Virgil then teleological? Is the result of the story inevitable? Could the struggle of Aeneas, his supporters and opponents, have turned out differently? The opponents (including the anti-Trojan Juno) act as if they think so and Virgil allows us, by the way the epic is written, to conceive of how the process might still be open. Aeneas doesn’t know quite where he will end up. He knows he has a destiny but not his destination.

THE EMPIRE LINE

Surely though, Virgil doesn’t belong to ‘all of us’ in the post-Roman world but to the Roman Empire. The *Aeneid* is *the* poem of the imperial mission, justifying future leaders (like the Emperor Augustus) and putting a high moral and providential gloss on the conquest of other peoples. It may however, if we read it ‘subversively’, only do this superficially, planting plenty of pathos and respect for those beaten down in Aeneas’s progress. This story either champions or undermines.

While reading the *Aeneid* I am less interested in speculating about Virgil’s everyday attitudes, whether republican, grateful or pragmatic, than how the *Aeneid* works as literature, how it can be read as applicable to any endeavour, how malleable its metaphor is to any difficult uncertain

struggle, of whatever politics, that people might pursue in the world. However, given both scholarship and the significance of the work to Augustan use and Roman education, I can't avoid the question of Virgilian politics altogether.

One of the most famous passages in the *Aeneid* is often taken as not only a statement of the poem's political vision but of a more general 'Roman Empire' ideology. It is quoted as such in de Ste Croix.¹² I refer to the advice uttered by Aeneas's father Anchises when his son visits him in the Underworld *Aen.* 6.851-3. It is given here in a free translation by the author.

Yours to rule the peoples with authority, Roman, remember how,
these shall be your arts, and base custom upon peace,
show mercy to the subject and put to flight the proud.

In another place, one might discuss other translations of these lines, not forgetting Dryden's incredible anti-slavery gloss.¹³ But beyond nuances of interpretation, I would rather concentrate on the contrast made in the last line of the passage. Might Virgil be merely echoing a Roman commonplace (this is how we maintain dominance) or was he rather reminding the colonisers who had already started under the Republic to go about their business mindfully, to distinguish the defeated from the recalcitrant? Again, I'm not going to claim Virgil as an anti-imperialist or pacifist. In fact, it may be just his method once more: *to Virgilise*, to improve the familiar, make the cliché profound. Anchises is addressing future colonisers. He asks them to remember how their forefathers did it: 'base custom upon peace'. Govern for consensus, concord, and distinguish among the Others. Apply lessons from the Past, don't live in it. Here, the *Aeneid* is speaking to Rome about Rome. It may indeed also be advice to one Roman in particular, Octavian, but the poem is not an Octaviad, not an account of Augustus's earlier victories. Such an account of battles and a still living hero (even if the author had personal reasons to be grateful to him) might be too recent, too parochial to suit a great epic. One writer to attempt an Octavian poem was Cornelius Severus who 'versified' Octavian's defeat of Sextus Pompeius at Sicily in 36 BCE, 'versifier' being the term Quintilian uses (10.1.89) to indicate that Severus's piece was simply not poetry. Hainsworth comments on the challenge of Virgil's task:

Precedent and patronage insisted on a public voice. It would praise Augustus, of course, but a great epic would have to sound a deeper note than the strident tones of propaganda. It would express the Romans' vision of themselves as they looked back on the road to empire and forward to the new age. This was the voice of Ennius, but it would speak in a mature poetical idiom. Nothing less would carry poet and reader through ten thousand verses. Virgil's epic would therefore be a national epic.¹⁴

For an epic poem to rival Homer and justify a national project (one nevertheless in line with the requirements of the hour), it had to do more than praise an individual or a regime.

TRAGIC EPIC

But why did it prove so amenable to Augustus and his court, becoming not just a respected work but the national classic, and then later appeal to so many different individuals, from royalists like Dryden to socialists like William Morris?

One view of how art is made, found in the critics Lucien Goldmann¹⁵ and Raymond Williams,¹⁶ is that the worldview a work exhibits isn't merely personal to an author, but belongs to one among a range of general approaches to the world. These can include tragic, romantic or dialectical, and apply to philosophy and even scientific theories. A particular work achieves its version of its 'world vision' through an author's treatment of various

ideas, the modification of the artistic forms available and the answer to specific problems of the author's life. But because it has a worldview, the text has a universal application. It is as if cultural products of the most resonant kind are both unique artefacts and examples of *a school*, as it were, across time. Even non-historically minded critics have noticed this, such as E.M. Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel*.¹⁷ There is another way in which world visions are not peculiar to an author. They are always inflected by the formal and philosophical needs of a particular social group. Goldmann in his classic study of the playwright calls Racine's world vision (which changes subtly with each play) 'tragic bourgeois' and roots it in the situation of a specific fraction of 17th century French society called the *noblesse de robe*.¹⁸

Virgil can be viewed as being at a particular crux of thought and social action, an era where the age of philosophical private solutions (Stoicism, Epicureanism, etc.) gave way to a 'classical' sense of intervention in the world. In just such a turn, Shakespeare's tragedies mark the end of feudal Christendom and Descartes ministers to the rise of Individualism and Reason. Of course, the *Aeneid* is not merely tragic *or* epic. It incorporates the above philosophies and finds in the legendary history of Aeneas and his people both hard luck (mistakes) and ultimate meaning (the future, our present). It is pained and hopeful. It is retrospective, being a tale with a momentous result, but fully embedded with the effort, pain and uncertainty of action in a present. It neither rejects the world nor makes it too reasonable. As a creation it belongs to a particular moment, the emergence of a Roman ideological amalgam - one that could appeal not only to the supporters of benevolent Caesarism (which might count as mainly the bourgeoisie) but all those in the 'free' aristocracy who would give up liberty for safety under the new first-citizen saviour and the now acknowledged drive to Empire. It has Greek elements (like Pollio's interest in learning) but it finally stands on a Roman 'realism' - pragmatic, objective, prudent (see Dumézil¹⁹).

When Maecenas his patron encouraged Virgil to recite, this new (or rejuvenated) civil ideology was just taking shape. It required something larger than the praise of a hero. Here it is useful to quote Eder:

(Octavian/Augustus's) greatest political achievement consists in having promoted the development of a patriotism that combined the legacy of the republic and his own accomplishment in preserving that legacy... Augustus has summoned once more to the consciousness of the Romans the responsibility that was traditional to them...²⁰

The deadly enemy was the immediate past, the struggles of the Civil War, of stick-in-the-muds and egotists, which had nearly broken Rome into chaos. Hainsworth draws the contrast:

Furor is the driving force of this anarchic society, under whose impulsion Julius Caesar had thought a civil war a reasonable alternative to a diminution of his 'dignity'. Nothing could be

more different from the public morality of a restored Augustan Rome.²¹

And Virgil was to have a share in developing it, perhaps even in partly inventing it, not by taking themes from a proclamation or Party pamphlet but by taking the old idea of obligation to the Fathers - ancestors, leaders and Gods - and 'licking' it into a shape relevant to the times, as in the famous analogy that Aelius Donatus attributes to the poet, of licking his poetry into shape as a she-bear does her cubs.

The hopefulness of the tragic epic has over the centuries appealed most, as Burrow says, to individuals who acknowledge the fact or prospect of defeat but continue to think the struggle worthwhile. He writes: 'When translated into English, he more usually gives a voice to those who feel that they are on the outside of a dominant culture.'²² These are readers who are marginalized, defeated or see their beliefs in crisis and under threat: Augustine in Africa, Dryden under the Orange, Seamus Heaney in these Isles and, of course, the founders of the Virgil Society themselves in the 1940s up against Fascism. Aeneas's travail is theirs.

As many have pointed out though, compared to Hector or Achilles, Antigone or Phaedra, Aeneas is a poor excuse for a hero. He isn't a 'big' character, more Clark Kent than Superman. The 'casualties' of the *Aeneid*, Dido and Turnus, are easily more vivid, more assertive. But that is the point. Aeneas alone doesn't bring meaning into the world. Instead, he wagers (like Pascal assuming it was a better gamble to presume a God) that his acts and those of his party will have desirable results. Nevertheless, he journeys without certainty of arrival, marking out a path, considering each juncture, and not without trouble or sorrow. When Christianity came over the Roman World, it promised a future (the afterlife, the Day of Judgement) but it withdrew too much from the world even as it was changing it. The individualism of Protestantism and the ambition of the European bourgeoisie was needed for a more 'epic' turn, producing its own Empires and revolutionary reactions until we come to the present, whether you call it Post-Modern or not, when so many have abandoned almost all hope in a Future or in human action as good and useful. The world is tragic again.

TROJANS AND LATINS

The second half of the *Aeneid* concerns the settling of Italy, the emergence of a combined people that will result in Rome. Isn't this then a demonstration of successful colonising and conquest?

One could begin by mentioning that it is part of the Aeneas legend that the people of Troy were descended from Italy. Italy is their original home. This however is not the way things are presented in the poem. R.D. Williams compares Aeneas with another epic traveller:

Odysseus is trying to get home to resume his old life in Ithaca exactly as he left it, but Aeneas has to find a new home and to build a new way of life.²³

The Latin court initially welcomes the Trojan remnant. Aeneas sends a party on ahead to reassure the King and the King, following a prophecy, is ready to offer his daughter's hand in marriage. Some though, like Turnus, take exception to the new arrivals. Later, a Trojan group kills a favoured stag, but as they didn't know it was a prized possession, the subsequent war is not their responsibility alone. It is in this and other moments that Aeneas recalls not Odysseus returning home to take back what is his, but that favourite theme of the recent century, the passage of the refugee, the immigrant and displaced person, exile or asylum-seeker, who must manoeuvre

between accommodation and self-respect and make a home.

When Enoch Powell quoted the *Aeneid* in 1968, he echoed the Sibyl (6.87) in foreseeing rivers running with blood as a consequence of a multicultural Britain.²⁴ Had he or someone else referred readers to the second half of the epic, they might have had the chance to appreciate how much closer the Trojan arrivals are to the migrants he feared than to those who take against them.

Furthermore, Northrop Frye, commentator on archetypes in legend and literature, has written, comparing our poem and the *Odyssey*:

The *Aeneid* develops the theme of return into one of rebirth, the end in New Troy being the starting point *renewed and transformed* by the hero's quest. (My italics.)²⁵

The transformative nature of the encounter in the *Aeneid* narrative can be contrasted with the more familiar liberation/renewal model, which has informed many movements, secular and religious, not least in the last century. This, of course, is the Biblical one of Exodus where Captivity is followed by Deliverance or Return and a previous wholeness are resumed in national or group rebirth. This narrative of a people's homecoming or liberation, especially in the light of recent history, has been found wanting for its exclusivity and chauvinism. Many of us ostracize it now as nationalism. In the second half of the *Aeneid*, there is a pervasive alternative. Aeneas and the Trojan remnant leave their home never to return. They travel and land in a country which may have been inhabited by their forefathers but which to them is new. They make friends and enemies there, and finally there is reconciliation, decided by the divine opponents Juno and Jupiter. The visitors give up their identification 'Trojan' and become Latin, or rather, a new mixed people, the Italians. The Roman Empire was indeed a multicultural Empire. In fact, polytheists as they were, the initial Roman invaders were sympathetic to amalgamating local cultures of worship through syncretism - equating one God with another. The English town of Bath, for example, is the holy site of Sulis Minerva, the Celtic name preceding the Latin for the deity of the springs.²⁶

The *Aeneid* is a story of trouble and transformation, taking and giving, strife and progress that ends in a new community. It's true that an analogy can be drawn between the Trojan search for a viable community in another land and the 'civilising mission' of a Great Power. Aeneas as colonial administrator is an available figure if a reader has the need to block out those details of the text that don't fit. However, if one reads the second half again, it's not so reassuring to the empire builder. The Trojans don't make Italy a new Troy. They don't appoint a new Priam or bring values and politics which they regard as final and, in the name of these, conquer another people. They come in peace, they struggle and form a new nation. The Gods, Jupiter and Juno, initially embodying inflexible differences, finally compromise. This tale can be used as an alibi for invasion; it can also be used as a model for peace.

THE REVOLUTION THAT WAS ROME

The climax of this section, and therefore of the whole epic, occurs at *Aen.* 12. 554-60. In Aristotelian terms, it is the *peripeteia*, that moment in a drama when the protagonist discovers or realises something that reverses their sense of themselves or the world,²⁷ as when Oedipus recognises that it is his actions - now discovered to be incest and father-murder - that have brought the plague on his beloved city. In the *Aeneid*, the realisation/discovery is not tragic but, one could

say, 'therapeutic'. Aeneas is inspired (by Venus, his mother god), as he struggles against the recalcitrant among the Latins, to recognise that the only way he will end the slaughter is if he changes tactics and turns from the plain to attack the enemy's city (at least in suggestion), that is, treat it like Troy. He must become more than a Homeric Trojan (more than a defender) and, as in modern therapies, confront the unthinkable.

There are other comparisons to be made at this point between warriors in Homer and in Virgil. Like Virgil, Homer is full of pathos. Frye comments that in the *Iliad* 'the fall of the enemy no less than of a friend or leader is tragic and not comic.'²⁸ Homer however is circular. Battle involves violence and pity but the struggle is continuous, constant. Achilles kills Hector while Achilles himself in the scheme of things will die because of this. Yet, what is gained? What is the result of the *Iliad*? The battle continues until Troy is destroyed but that climax is outside the poem and is not celebrated by it. In the *Aeneid*, Troy is levelled, Aeneas journeys until there is a struggle between the natives and the migrants in lands of the Latin. Italy and Rome are the promise, and after Rome, we can add, Europeans and European colonies, new Empires and the modern world. Each of these turnings is a development. When the Trojans arrive and end up mixing with the Latins, this is not a return to an origin, a native and purified land, but a revolution. The old ways of Latins and Trojans have merged, advanced in a new (Hegelian) synthesis, though this too is not without its own tensions and problems. The Romans knew they were hybrids, mongrels and students of other cultures as well as observers of their own. In this concluding book of the story, the *Aeneid* bears witness to the broad historical reality of cross-culture, of the effect of one social group on another, whether in a violent or gradual way. Was this part of Virgil's message, to remind his first audience in that proud aristocratic city that they were Italians too (like his own provincial self)? It's a metaphor we can still take to heart. We did not do it On Our Own. There are no totally separate Others, even if divided by custom or force. We are all in this together.

THE LESSON OF THE *AENEID*

So, to sum up, the vision of the *Aeneid* is one whole. To those who would cut it up into a private and a public 'voice', or perhaps an imperialist and a pacifist voice, one can reply, why only two? What about a Stoic, an Epicurean, a Platonic voice? No doubt, they can all be found there (and have been), in tension with each other, like a Shavian play or Bakhtin's 'dialogical' novel.²⁹

The *Aeneid* recites a legend of Aeneas's endeavour, the Trojans' sojourn, to find a new home, a new place, a people that will one day issue in Rome, not with two voices but many sides. It is an endeavour not without mistakes, backsliding, sorrow, loss and the constant pressure of outside forces. It is a reply to the *Iliad*: Homer's heroes suffer and struggle but are leaves that fall from the tree, over and over, cyclic in death. In the *Aeneid*, they suffer and struggle but they reach somewhere, not their old home, like Odysseus, but what will become a new society. When the Trojans end their quest and create a people made of two nationalities, something is created that was not there before, and this can be called a revolution. Indeed the Roman Empire itself could be said to be a revolution. For Rome was different from previous Empires, those of Egypt and Sumer for example. Rome wasn't defined as a race or tribe amongst others, nor the 'children' of a Royal family, but a culture, emphasising skills, discipline, technique, things that could be universally learnt. As something that could be spread, not merely imposed, it was an example not only to future Empires (who promoted their 'universality', their applicability to everyone, even as their

racism denied it) but to worldwide movements generally, from Christianity and Islam to the various international social utopias of our own day, even if discredited.

There is much to debate about how baleful the influence and heritage of the Emperors and the Senators, the Gladiators and Governors have proved. For example, the recent question as to whether these Romans could be described, in our terms, as racist. The *Aeneid* itself is engaging and convincing not just because it allows the Other a voice (which may merely mark the generosity of those who control how the Other is defined and controlled). It has engaged so many different individuals because it admits strikingly that triumph involves loss and doubt. At the very close of the final book, in Aeneas's 'furious' lack of mercy to Turnus, we might even ask if the hero hasn't finally lost his heroism. Whether we read this scene as retribution or a bad example, it's an outrageous finish. The epic thus ends not in certainty and the triumph of the Good and the Heroic, but in tense doubt for the reader (why else do we keep on discussing it?), a troubling close that not even that great advocate of a critical relation to the text Bertolt Brecht ever quite achieved. Whether intended as a condemnation or an exculpation, the ending of Turnus can give us an exercise in not surrendering ourselves to an endeavour, a hero or a text unthinkingly. We are left to ask whether Aeneas is to be respected at all. There is no certain answer. We may well be unsure but we are stimulated to mull it over, to debate. Can it really be true that someone wrote this work over two thousand years ago?

OUR CLASSIC

Aeneas does not set out to lose comrades or kill the hostile. Mishap and mistake come the Trojans' way. As a Pre-Christian, Virgil doesn't have a 'problem of evil'. Shit happens, but the *Aeneid* is neither bleak nor euphemistic, defeatist nor anodyne. Many of those to whom the *Aeneid* became attractive enough to warrant translation, were those who required such a species of intelligent hope, of renewal and transformation. The text offers itself for examination and evaluation, our thoughtfulness.

At the end of the 20th century, many of us were wiser, more careful and more sceptical of 'revolutionary' promises (whether of technological fixes, social transformation or Saving the World for Free Market Democracy). Some would see this as the anti-heroic end of history's endeavour, as laziness and masochism. This paper is only a proposal to read the *Aeneid* as a poem, a metaphor, not as a guidebook or book of rules. Nevertheless, its wisdom as a story may indeed have its uses for those who might search for a new *imperium*, the great endeavour of a new international community. We can still think we have a future, a destiny, even if we don't know our destination.

Virgil is the readers' writer. Each reader is engaged in a thoughtful struggle (especially if translating it into another language), an endeavour to comprehend and appreciate the work. We go with it, bearing it (*superanda omnis fortuna ferendo est* - all fortune is to be overcome by bearing it' *Aen.* 5.710), comprehending/ interpreting/co-creating, as we progress.

These thoughts are presented as something to be added to the discussion and reading of a certain text, a way of seeing and reading to be considered among evidence, forensic (scholarly) or witness ('readings'), at a trial where the jury is always all readers. It is a devoted offering to the process of reaching a verdict about the value we give these works, our defining of a classic.

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NOTES

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- ¹ T.S. Eliot, 'What is a Classic?' Presidential Address to the Virgil Society (1944), *On Poetry and Poets* (London, 1957).
- ² R. Fitzgerald, *The Aeneid* (London, 1983).
- ³ S. M. Braund, *Latin Literature* (London 2002), 18.
- ⁴ For the concept of the subversive voice in the *Aeneid*, see R.F. Thomas, *Virgil and the Augustan Reception*, (Cambridge. 2001) and R.D. Williams 'The Purpose of the Aeneid' in *Oxford Readings in Virgil's Aeneid*, ed S.J. Harrison (Oxford, 1990).
- ⁵ For more on the cat and mouse game that a Leader can play with an Artist, see S.Volkov, *Shostakovich and Stalin*, tr. Antonina W.Bouis (London, 2004).
- ⁶ T. Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford, 1983), 209-213. In the same chapter, 'Conclusion: Political Criticism', Eagleton calls for the reinvention of 'Rhetoric, which was the received form of critical analysis all the way from ancient society to the eighteenth century...', 205.
- ⁷ J. Berger, *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (Harmondsworth, 1965), 131.
- ⁸ English translation from H.R. Fairclough, *Virgil* (Harvard, 1934).
- ⁹ R.O.A.M. Lyne, *Words and the Poet* (Oxford, 1989), 54-6.
- ¹⁰ B. Brecht, 'Short Description of a New Technique of Acting', 136-47, and 'Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction', 69-77, in *Brecht on Theatre*, tr. John Willett (London, 1978).
- ¹¹ M.C. J. Putnam, 'The Art of Catullus', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 65, 1961, 165-205.
- ¹² The lines are quoted in Ch. VI. 'Rome the Suzerain' in G.E.M. de Ste Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (London), 1997), 327
- ¹³ Aen. 6.553 becomes in Dryden: 'To tame the Proud, the fetter'd Slave to free' (6.1176: 1697).
- ¹⁴ J.B. Hainsworth, *The Idea of Epic* (California, 1991), 95.
- ¹⁵ For the best presentation of Goldmann's formal-historical approach and his concept of the 'world vision', see L. Goldmann, *The Hidden God*, tr. Philip Thody (London 1964).
- ¹⁶ See especially R. Williams 'Literature and Sociology, In Memory of Lucien Goldmann' in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London, 1980) and 'Form and Meaning: *Hippolytus* and *Phèdre*' in *Writing in Society* (London, 1984).
- ¹⁷ See E.M. Forster's discussion of writers as echoing each other's approach across history - for example, similarities between Dickens and H.G. Wells - in 'Introductory' to *Aspects of the Novel* (London, 1949), Pocket Edition, 12 - 23.
- ¹⁸ Goldmann, cit., Ch. VI 'Jansenism and the *noblesse de robe*', 103-41.
- ¹⁹ For Dumézil on the value of prudence for the Romans in religion, law and culture, see G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, vol.1, tr. Philip Krapp (Baltimore and London, 1996), 40-41.
- ²⁰ W. Eder, 'Augustus and the Power of Tradition: The Augustan Principate as Binding Link between Republic and Empire' in Raaflaub K.A. and Toher M., *Between Republic and Empire Interpretations of Augustus and His Principate* (California, 1990), 87.
- ²¹ Hainsworth, 105.
- ²² C. Burrow, 'Virgil in English Translation' in *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, ed. Charles Martindale (Cambridge 1997), 36.
- ²³ R.D. Williams (note 4 above), 28.
- ²⁴ An addendum to the 1968 'rivers of blood' speech: in 1987 Powell was interviewed for a TV profile and regretted his misquotation of Virgil, that is, referring to 'the Roman' rather than the Sibyl. He'd taken out Virgil's phrase 'and put in a translation'. Powell added, 'I probably ought to have stuck to the Latin. That's a good motto in life: "stick to the Latin".' From R.Shepherd, *Enoch Powell A Biography* (London, 1996), 359-60. The speech itself is in E. Powell, *Freedom and Reality*, ed, John Wood (London, 1969).
- ²⁵ N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (London, 1990), 319.
- ²⁶ L. Adkins and R.A. Adkins, *Dictionary of Roman Religion* (Oxford, 1996), 212.
- ²⁷ Aristotle, 'On the Art of Poetry' in *Classical Literary Criticism* (London, 1965), 46.
- ²⁸ Frye, 19.
- ²⁹ M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Massachusetts, 1968).