"Amid the tears we sing": Virgil and humanity

Revised from a paper given to the Virgil Society on 19 October 2019[*]

Foreword

Since the paper on which this essay is based was delivered, and in a bewildering matter of months, coronavirus has ripped through our lives and overturned everything. It has shaken confidence in modern certainties and, in ways that many of us are completely unused to, occasioned daily unease about what tomorrow will usher in. In such times, our faith in science and its ability to ameliorate the crisis is urgently felt. But alongside that, literature and music, even if they have previously always brought diversion and solace, have come to assume a yet greater significance. Poets like Virgil have tapped out templates of such profundity that they can stand as guides amid the current precariousness and heightened awareness of fragility. Virgil's works confront us with mortal defectiveness, impotence and the cruel satires that Fate loves to indulge in. Yet alongside this searing vision of the human condition, Virgil offers a series of wider-reaching vantage points, achieved through the constant sense of motion and the cycles of flux and reflux that undergird his verse. Scored into the lines of his hexameters is hope; even as the serpent hisses, the light gleams. In short, the perspectives that Virgil offers from his own time provide a stabilising resource, because they invite us, adrift as we feel, into a matrix of humanity that seems to have changed very little.

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The keynote of this essay, "Virgil and Humanity", will, to some eyes, look ludicrously broad and perhaps even hubristic. Naïve as the choice may prove to be, the remit can be explained. The focus on breadth was driven in part by a theory that recently emerged from an area of research that could not, at least on the face of it, be further removed from Classics:

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the field of neuroscience. The theory in question concerns the configuration of the brain. It posits that the two hemispheres of the brain are in tension: the logical half on the left and the creative half on the right.[1] The logical part draws us into detail and enables close investigation of minutiae, but it won't tell us about how to feel our way around or to see the bigger picture. This happens via the other part (the right) which enlarges the horizons of, and is adventurous in, the imagination. This part has a much stronger relationship with external reality as represented by the senses, making it in effect the mediator of experience. According to Iain McGilchrist, a chief proponent of this theory, modern and postmodern worlds are, to our detriment, becoming increasingly dominated by the left brain. While the thesis is not without its limitations or detractors, it nonetheless raises valuable questions about the ways we evaluate literature.[2] It also validates the idea that the holistic view may help unlock a fuller "personality" of a piece of writing, one which looks very different to that afforded by a more reductionist approach. Virgil's rich verse merits a wide range of approaches, but if we do not balance an increasing number of granular and narrowly focused treatments with more comprehensive overviews, we risk neglecting the broader experience of reading Virgil and failing to attend to what moves us emotionally as well as intellectually.

Thus influencing this essay have been the insights of scholars who seem most predominantly to prioritize the outward-looking hemisphere on the right of the brain. I have been drawn, in particular, to the scholarship of Richard Jenkyns and Richard Thomas, both of whom have in various ways argued that Virgil enriches our lives through the aesthetic qualities of his poetry, qualities which in turn generate their own meaning.[3] Another source of inspiration has been Italo Calvino, whose soul-stirring short essays on literature, organized around spacious themes such as lightness and quickness, visibility and multiplicity, provide ways to understand poetry's capacity for impression rather than argument.[4] Following their lead, I will submit that it pays to consider generally why Virgil's poetry digs deep into our

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1 I. McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, 2009, New Haven CT.

2 The work has been criticized for the (overly) broad psychological and cultural conclusions McGilchrist draws. His analysis also falls within what has been termed "the mereological fallacy" by philosophers who believe such assertions are conceptually mistaken, insofar as they unreasonably inflate the conception of the "brain" by assigning to this one part of the body powers and activities that belong to the whole living being (for example, M. R. Bennett & P. M. S. Hacker, *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience*, 2003, Oxford).

3 R. Jenkyns, 'Pathos, Tragedy and Hope in the *Aeneid*', *JRS* 75 (1985), 60–77; *idem*, *Virgil's Experience: Nature and History, Times, Names and Places*, 1998, Oxford; R. F. Thomas, 'Aesthetics, Form and Meaning in the *Georgics*', in B. Xinyue & N. Freer (eds), *Reflections and New Perspectives on Virgil's* Georgics, 2019, London, 44–64.

4 I. Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. G. Brock, 2016, London. These "memos" were the fruits of Calvino's 1985–86 Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard. They assessed literature and the whole range of human thought under the headings 'Lightness', 'Quickness', 'Exactitude', 'Visibility' and 'Multiplicity', five highly personal meditations before death intervened; the last theme was to have been 'Consistency'.

hardwiring. I will suggest that vested in his verse is a set of realities around which every life clusters, a consideration of which will in turn enable a different beam of light to be shone over the Virgilian landscape.

There are two aspects of this broad-ranging premise which require clarification. The first pertains to the Virgilian focus. This essay in no way seeks to imply that the fundamental truths Virgil's poetry embodies are exclusive to him. Great literature of any kind, and composed in any age, can expand our vision sufficiently to facilitate a deeper apprehension of universal principles, and this essay will indeed enlist a range of other poets of different periods along the way. Yet the Virgilian corpus, I would aver, offers a panorama whose richness of aspect helps unite the particular and the general with singular efficacy and immediacy. This is achieved in part through Virgil's intense attentiveness to the natural world. It is also because Virgil plunges us into real life, the lives of the dispossessed, the disoriented, the vanquished, the triumphant, the dying, the lovelorn. His poems don't offer words, words, words, but blood. They captivate, arrest and affect at the deepest level, because they are constructed around stories we all inhabit. I have read Virgil with students at every stage and age, and while points of connection vary, reactions are invariably rooted in the poems' bearing on the actuality of our own existence. Like a Heraclitean river, it is not possible in the case of Virgil to step into the same poem twice. Yet in the lines of his verse we always find a thread of reality that attaches itself to our world.

The second point concerns Virgil's ability (or not) to transcend the centuries. While there is certainly a timeless quality to Virgil's verse, I do not propose that it can be liberated from its own historical, cultural or artistic context, or that a study of Virgil's poetry through the lens of sensibility needs to jettison a rich body of secondary literature which historicizes and interrogates the many intertextual possibilities inherent in his verse. Indeed, such historical and intertextual factors in many ways enhance the poetry's beating pulse. The climate in which Virgil wrote his poetry surely conditioned, to some extent at least, the fundamental emotions that steered its composition.[5] His three great *opera* were composed when Rome was emerging from an interminable era of trauma – years of debilitating civil war. Then, as now, what prevailed was an awareness of crisis, and whenever blight strikes, the effect, I think, is similar: it forces us to take stock, to reassess the basics. One way to do that is to cleave to the voices of the past, and at root, intertextuality is just that: a borrowing of our forebears' ideas, which are themselves enfolded in experience. The past, unlike the future, contains facts not guesses; we turn to it *not* because it inoculates us against suffering, but because it helps irrigate the present through insights born out of encounter, and props us up with its ballast

[5] Susanna Braund suggests that the primary factor in any Virgilian "philosophy" was an allegiance to Rome and Italy (S. M. Braund, 'Virgil and the Cosmos: Religious and Philosophical Ideas' in *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, ed. F. Mac Góráin & C. Martindale, 2019^2, Cambridge, 279–98).

of perspective. Textual *imitatio* can be a dazzling means to demonstrate learning, certainly, but it is also an atavistic impulse.

I divide this essay into five areas that seem to reflect most effectively the great abstractions that Virgil's verse accommodates: (1) rootedness and movement; (2) cycle of life; (3) bitter-sweetness; (4) human connections; and (5) human limitation. Each is treated as distinct, but they are ultimately also all related to each other. The themes of this exegesis are proffered tentatively and experimentally, not definitively. They represent an entirely personal view of Virgil's poetry, and are offered with caution rather than certitude.

1. Rootedness and movement

Principio sedes apibus statioque petenda ("First seek a settled home for your bees", *Geo*. 4.8). This prescription, found in the fourth book of Virgil's didactic work, the *Georgics*, about the centrality of the hive, the home of the anthropomorphic bees, reads almost like one of the Ten Commandments. The ache for home lives in us all, and we have all witnessed the mass migrations across the globe of people desperate to "get home" as the dangers posed by Covid-19 became clearer. Whether home is a person, a place, a country of birth or a constructed image of safety, it is a principle that is firmly enmeshed in our emotional hardware. Thus, some of the most touching passages in the fourth book of the *Georgics* are those which pertain to the apian homestead, for example the descriptions of the bees insulating their hives (37–41) and the portraits of homely sanctuary (*effossis...latebris / sub terra fovere larem*. "they have made a snug home in tunnelled hiding places underground", 42–43. *intima more suo sese in cunabula condent*. "as is their wont, they will burrow themselves far within their cradling cells", 66), sketches made all the more poignant by an awareness of the predators that lurk close by. Our deep yearning for a base is perhaps what lends Virgilian descriptions of the soil, the natural home of trees and plants, their pathos. A connection with the soil of our origin is vividly conveyed in the second book of the *Georgics*, not least through its incorporation of the physical, including *manibus, digitos* and *oculis* ("hands, fingers, eyes"), which enable the reader to touch, handle and behold the *tellus* ("earth") being described (248–55). The sense of the soil as nature's most basic shelter is exquisitely conveyed shortly afterwards in the depiction of seeds of the vine leaving their *matrem* ("mother", 268).

The theme of rootedness also bulks large in Virgil's great epic, the *Aeneid*. As has been observed elsewhere, the work is, in essence, a *nostos* ("homecoming") story.[6] Unlike Odysseus, of course, Aeneas does not *know* the homeland Rome he quests for as he roams. Yet it is this paradox that frees Virgil up to explore the longing for hearth and home to even greater effect.

[6] A. Barchiesi, *Homeric Effects in Vergil's Narrative*, 2017, Princeton, 118.

One of the most affecting passages in *Aen.* 1 is when Aeneas gazes down on Carthage as it is being built. Aeneas observes the foundations of great buildings, gates and paved high-roads and city walls, but his (and our) eye is also drawn to a group of men as they select sites for enclosed dwellings, in short, to the creation of home: *pars optare locum tecto et concludere sulco* ("some choose the site for a dwelling and enclose it with a furrow", 425). Aeneas is compelled to cry aloud *O fortunati, quorum iam moenia surgunt* ("Happy they whose walls already rise", 437), a sentiment that reverberates with the human longing for stable ground and a permanence; it is a yearning rendered all the more potent insofar as Aeneas' statement, while at one level specific, relating as it does to the concrete progress of the Carthaginians, may also be read generally: "happy are *all* those ..."

Destiny also plays a major role in pushing Aeneas and the Trojans on to Italy. Through it, Virgil explores the instinctive connections we have with a place we can call home in yet more complex ways. "Home" in Virgil, can stand for a place from where one's ancestors came, an inherited bond with a land otherwise completely unknown. And so we see the repeated use in the epic of the patronymic *Dardanius* to describe the Trojans, which, when combined with Latinus' disclosure in book 7 that Dardanus was by origin from Italy (*his ortus ... agris*, literally, "sprung from these fields", 206), underscores this idea of ancient ties and roots with the ground itself. It comes as a moment of great succour when, in response to Aeneas' helpless questioning, *Quem sequimur? quove ire iubes? ubi ponere sedes?* ("Whom should we follow? To where do you bid us go? Where fix our home?", 3.88), a disembodied voice in the temple of Apollo says (3.94–96):

> *Dardanidae duri, quae vos a stirpe parentum*
> *prima tulit tellus, eadem vos ubere laeto*
> *accipiet reduces. Antiquam exquirite matrem.*
>
> ("Long-suffering sons of Dardanus, the land which bore you first from your parents' stock shall welcome you back in her fruitful bosom. Seek out your ancient mother").

The immense reassurance in the notion of homecoming is again captured exquisitely in the most simple of utterances by the aged king Latinus: *Hinc Dardanus ortus, / huc repetit* ("From here was Dardanus sprung and to here he returns", 7.240–41). The weight of meaning invested in the single word *huc*, placed emphatically at the start of the line, is extraordinary: it transforms Italy from an alien land into a comforting haven.

Set against this strong instinct for rootedness is movement. Virgil's poetry vibrates with motion. Such movement stirs us because it is a fundamental condition of existence:

all life is a constant journey, and, even as we cling to fixity, we are programmed to move and grow.

Virgil so often presents us with people on the move, their progress accentuated by its relativity to others' immobility. In the first *Eclogue*, for example, Meliboeus and Tityrus happen upon each other and briefly speak, but their trajectories are completely different (1–4; 64–66):

Tityre, tu patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi
silvestrem tenui Musam meditaris avena;
nos patriae fines et dulcia linquimus arva.
nos patriam fugimus; tu, Tityre, lentus in umbra ...

At nos hinc alii sitientis ibimus Afros,
pars Scythiam et rapidum cretae veniemus Oaxen
et penitus toto divisos orbe Britannos.

("You, Tityrus, lie under the canopy of a spreading beech, wooing the woodland Muse on slender reed, but we are leaving our country's bounds and sweet fields. We are outcasts from our country: you, Tityrus, at ease beneath the shade ...

But we must go hence – some to the thirsty Africans, some to reach Scythia and the chalk-rolling Oaxes, and the Britons, wholly sundered from all the world")".

In the opening lines we find Tityrus *recubans* – he is staying in Italy, whereas Meliboeus is leaving the *patria*, as captured in the verbs: *linquimus* and *fugimus* and later *ibimus*. In a similar way, of course, the entire *Aeneid* is constructed around a migration from Troy to Italy and proleptically to Rome. Aeneas and Dido famously meet, but like Meliboeus and Tityrus, only one of them is on the move.

Kinesthetic qualities are evident everywhere in Virgil's verse, and there is movement of every type and tempo and in all directions. Along the horizontal axis, Virgil takes us, in the space of two hexameter lines on a fast-paced race around the geographical points of the compass: East and West, North and South (*Geo*. 3.276–78):

saxa per et scopulos et depressas convallis
diffugiunt, non, Eure, tuos, neque solis ad ortus,
in Boream Caurumque, aut unde nigerrimus Auster
nascitur.

> (“they flee over rocks and crags and lowly dales, not towards your rising, East Wind, nor to the Sun’s, but to the North and the Northwest, or thither where rises the blackest South”).

In this case, it is the heat of love and passion that drives the velocity. Venus has inflamed a team of mares with an overwhelming and extreme desire, but as Virgil himself comments just prior to this account, *amor omnibus idem* (“We all feel the same love”, 3.244). The verb *ruunt* (“they rush”), which appears directly before this broad assertion, further conveys the inescapable gallop that being in love entails.

Virgil’s verse can also operate both vertically and horizontally, as in the beautiful image of a spreading tree in the second book of the *Georgics*. Here the great oak “strikes its roots as far down into the Hadean pit as it lifts its crest to the airs of heaven” (*quantum vertice ad auras / aetherias, tantum radice in Tartara tendit*, 291–92). The alpha to omega reach captured in the use of *vertice* and *radice* and *huc illuc* (297) conjures the life force inherent in nature, but the movement described is gradual, more stretch than sprint, and is representative, as Virgil implies, of the development of maturity and fortitude that can only happen over a span of years.

Philip Hardie has recently placed the spotlight on the notion of “heavenly ascent”,[7] and such upward movement is indeed a key engine of poetic vigour. Poetry has the ability to take us unfettered and in a single breath from the bestial floor to the celestial heights.[8] In Virgil we see this mode of blossoming out from the prosaic to the heavenly in many places, whether in corn being uprooted and tossed on high (*Geo.* 1.319–20) or in the acceleration of young charioteers (*Geo.* 3.108–09): in both cases Virgil takes us from *humilis* to *sublimis*. Such a propulsion is felt too in *Ecl.* 6. Here we are thrust at the start of the poem into the base world of the satyr Silenus, inebriated, crude, rude and prostrate, everything at ground level, accentuated by the lines ending in forms of the verb *iaceo* and which in turn play on Iacchus / Bacchus, patron of cups. Then in a matter of verses up to the higher plane we ascend, as Virgil opens up for us the cosmos through the mouth of Silenus (13–17; 31–34):

> *Pergite, Pierides. Chromis et Mnasyllos in antro*
> *Silenum pueri somno videre iacentem,*
> *inflatum hesterno venas, ut semper, Iaccho;*
> *serta procul tantum capiti delapsa iacebant,*
> *et gravis attrita pendebat cantharus ansa.*

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[7] I heard his thoughts on this in a talk entitled ‘Heavenly Emotions’, which he gave in November 2018 at the Institute of Classical Studies (London).

[8] A nod to the final line of Yeats’ great poem ‘The Magi’ (“The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor”), which so potently combines the hope of heavenly Christ and the grubbiness of the stable birthplace.

Namque canebat, uti magnum per inane coacta
semina terrarumque animaeque marisque fuissent
et liquidi simul ignis; ut his ex omnia primis,
omnia et ipse tener mundi concreverit orbis.

("Proceed, Pierian maids! The lads Chromis and Mnasyllos saw Silenus lying asleep in a cave, his veins swollen, as ever, with the wine of yesterday. Hard by lay the garlands, just fallen from his head, and his heavy tankard was hanging by its well-worn handle.

For he sang how, through the vast void, the seeds of earth, and air, and sea, and liquid fire withal were gathered together; how from these elements all nascent things, yes, all, and even the young globe of the world grew together").

As human beings, we are the only species whose consciousness extends to a contemplation of the universe. In a sense the cosmos is within us, and Virgil, through the poetic movement in *Ecl.* 6 (and elsewhere), expresses that propensity for emotional elevation to wondrous effect. Indeed, the many striking shifts in scale from micro to macro and vice versa that permeate his poems seem to point to a Virgilian cognizance of the potential for magnitude within the slightest frames (most famously, for example, *ingentes animos angusto in pectore versant*. "They [the bees] have mighty souls beating in their tiny breasts", *Geo.* 4.83). Virgil's poems compel us to look upwards and outwards. Through the perpetually moving ebbs and flows of his verse, he offers views from a copious range of angles and enables us to inhabit a space larger than ourselves.

2. Cycle of life

This impression of a constantly dynamic process evident in Virgil's verse leads onto my second theme – the cycle of life. There is a time-laden quality in all of Virgil's writing. To read any passage is to enter into a system of which we are all part: a *cursus vitae* in which day becomes night, spring becomes winter, youth becomes old age and birth moves towards death. The perpetual motion of time's passage is powerfully encapsulated in Virgil's pronouncement *sed fugit interea, fugit inreparabile tempus* ("But time meanwhile is flying, flying beyond recall", *Geo.* 3.284), a line whose very verbal rhythm enacts the inexorable march of the minutes. The flow of life, which encompasses all of nature and all its creatures, can be felt on every page of Virgil. The effect is achieved, for instance, through the most delicate descriptions of the progression of the hours, as in *Ecl.* 8 (14–15; 17):

Frigida vix caelo noctis decesserat umbra,
cum ros in tenera pecori gratissimus herba ...

Nascere, praeque diem veniens age, Lucifer, almum ...

("Scarce had night's cool shade left the sky, when the dew on the tender grass is sweetest to the flock ...

Rise, o morning star, heralding the genial day ...").

The annual cycle is similarly woven into the fabric of Virgil's verse. In the second book of the *Georgics* the year is said to roll back upon itself over its own footsteps (*vestigia*), a sentiment which is all the more expressive for the elision between *atque* and *in* at the start of line 402: *Redit agricolis labor actus in orbem / atque in se sua per vestigia volvitur annus* ("The farmer's toil returns, moving in a circle, as the year rolls back upon itself over its own footsteps", 401–02). This arc of time is further reinforced through an evocation of seasonal shifts. This is not a feature peculiar to Virgil, of course, and many poets have educed the evolution of the seasons as a metaphor for man's life. One of the finest expositors of this is Horace. In his Ode 4.7 seasonal changes occur in the very words of single lines, beginning with the snows, that quickly transform into sprigs of grass, only to return again soon to *bruma iners* ("winter inert"). The Virgilian approach also has much in common with the Romantic poets of the early nineteenth century, such as Keats in 'The Human Seasons':

Four Seasons fill the measure of the year;
There are four seasons in the mind of man:
He has his lusty Spring, when fancy clear
Takes in all beauty with an easy span:
He has his Summer, when luxuriously
Spring's honied cud of youthful thought he loves
To ruminate, and by such dreaming high
Is nearest unto heaven: quiet coves
His soul has in its Autumn, when his wings
He furleth close; contented so to look
On mists in idleness – to let fair things
Pass by unheeded as a threshold brook.
He has his Winter too of pale misfeature,
Or else he would forego his mortal nature.

However, Virgil's treatment of the ever-revolving wheel of life is yet more sinewy. Within both the detail and the broader frameworks of the narrative, he embeds a powerful sense of the complete irretrievability of yesterday and the inevitability of tomorrow. Images of youth and old age are ubiquitous in Virgil's poetry, and regularly juxtaposed. Often, for example, a boy (*puer*) is in dialogue with an old man (*senex*), tableaux that serve to embed an abiding impression of the opposing and evolving parameters of mortal life. But Virgil confronts us not just with our own mortality, but also with its place in a larger continuum of birth, growth, demise and death within the entire edifice of nature. Such essential facts of life are in part elevated by Virgil through his harmonization of the primal world with human evolution. In the second book of the *Georgics*, for example, we read that saplings are the *prolem* ("offspring", 3) of the vines. In the same book, he outlines how adolescent trees burst forth spontaneously and exhibit a *silvestrem animum* ("sylvan spirit", 47–51). In the third book of the *Georgics*, as part of a much longer passage about plague, we read about the return to earth of the dying bull, where the compulsion of downward movement captures so poignantly the moment of decline: *at ima / solvuntur latera, atque oculos stupor urget inertis / ad terramque fluit devexo pondere cervix* ("but his lowest flanks are unstrung, numbness weighs upon the languid eyes and his neck sinks with drooping weight to earth", 522–24). Yet, as the regeneration of the bee community in *Geo.* 4 so powerfully brings into focus, the well-springs of renewal are ever present, enabling the sequence of life to begin all over again.

In all Virgil's poems we are met with the unceasing revolutions of time's wheel and the seeds of life from which we are all sprung, and which sustain us for the appointed duration. Individual lives are finite, but Virgil's verse shows us that life itself is eternal, propelled by its own force, as captured with immediacy in words such as *iniusssa* ("unbidden", of the grass growing up, *Geo*. 1.55–56) and *vi propria* ("inborn force", of fruit trees, *Geo*. 2.428).

While nature can provide a valuable illustration of such relentless patterning, man's consciousness of life's iterations invests the process with great tenderness. Readers of Virgil are regularly presented with the ghosts of those who have preceded us. Encounters Aeneas has with the wraiths of the Underworld thus bring us face to face with our own perishability and recyclability. But there are other finely-drawn passages which achieve a similar effect. A good example is the allusion in the *Georgics* to *galeas ... inanis* ("empty helmets") which prompts a re-imagining of a living people whose heads once wore them (1.493–97):

> *Scilicet et tempus veniet, cum finibus illis*
> *agricola incurvo terram molitus aratro*
> *exesa inveniet scabra robigine pila,*
> *aut gravibus rastris galeas pulsabit inanis*
> *grandiaque effossis mirabitur ossa sepulcris.*

> ("Yes, and a time will come when in those lands the farmer, as he cleaves the soil with his curved plough, will find javelins corroded with rusty mould, or with his heavy hoe will strike empty helmets, and marvel at gigantic bones in the upturned graves").

A sensitive awareness of humanity's progression through time is further achieved through references to inter-generational bequests. In *Ecl.* 9, for example, we find the injunction *Insere, Daphni, piros: carpent tua poma nepotes* ("Graft your pears, Daphnis; your children's children shall gather the fruits you have sown", 50). We witness the passing down of song via the shepherd's flute (*Ecl.* 5.85–87), and the shade that trees will provide to future generations of children (*Geo.* 2.57–58). The *Aeneid* too operates within such a framework: the figures of Anchises, Aeneas, Iulus and his future offspring populate a generational chain. Not only individuals, but entire cities of people too, are stitched into a broader system of existence, as we witness the ruin of Troy, the predicted collapse of Carthage, the prospective rise of Rome, and its own possible fall,[9] the transfer of Italian land and the displacement that it entails. Virgil's poetry fills our senses with the rhythm of change, but he also shows us how much *persists* in its oscillations. The Virgilian corpus serves as a literary connector that enables us to yoke nature and humanity, heaven and earth, and make sense of the entirety of the system to which we all belong.

3. Bittersweetness

"Poetry might be defined as the clear expression of mixed feelings".[10] Auden captures well the thrust of my next category, which suggests that when we read Virgil's poetry, we feel both hope and despair. Many scholars have identified the prominence of each strain. Yet the Virgilian oeuvre is often assessed according to a binary opposition of optimism and pessimism, with some drawing attention to the poetry's deeply melancholic tenor – *sunt lacrimae rerum* (*Aen.* 1.462, impossibly difficult to render into English, but literally, "there are tears for [or of] things", depending on whether the genitive *rerum* is taken as objective or subjective) often being cited – and others arguing for an optimistic reading, one which celebrates the world and professes the "constructive potential" of Virgil's verse.[11] It seems to me that the oxymoron of

[9] It is difficult to avoid making a connection between Rome and the ultimate demise of all kingdoms in *res Romanae perituraque regna* ("Roman affairs and the kingdoms bound to perish") in *Geo.* 2.498.

[10] W. H. Auden, *New Year Letter* included in *W. H. Auden, Collected Poems*, ed. E. Mendelson, 1991, London.

[11] The reference to "constructive potential" comes from L. Morgan, *Patterns of Redemption in Virgil's* Georgics', 1999, Cambridge, *passim*. The broader bibliography for this debate, which subsumes all his works, is too vast to chart here.

bittersweetness (or sweetbitterness) can usefully help to re-centre this debate.[12] For in Virgil, just as in a Lieder song cycle, joy and pain appear inseparably together.

In the *Georgics*, in particular, the adjective *laetus* ("happy / joyful") is a frequent visitor. The entire work begins with the wonderful trumpet call of *Quid faciat laetas segetes* … ("What makes the crops joyous …", 1.1). Some lines on we read again: *hiberno laetissima pulvere farra, laetus ager* ("With winter's dust, most joyous is the corn, joyous the field", 1.101–02). In book 4 the bees are described as *laetae* (55). And yet in both books there are frequent disruptions of joy, and disaster soon strikes. In book 1, just 6 lines on from the second quote above, Virgil refers to how *exustus ager morientibus aestuat herbis* ("the scorched earth swelters with the green blades dying", 107). And in book 4 threats to the bees' existence lurk in so many of the lines. Virgil must have been alive to the fact that *laetus* is a quasi-homonym with *letum*, one of Latin's words for "death". Indeed in his verse the noun *letum* constantly threatens to cast a dark shadow over the happiness encased in the adjective *laetus*. Joy and grief are in and around Virgil's words all the time. *Ecl.* 7 is a further evocation of this, a poem in which the upbeat stanzas of Corydon dance a ballet with the negative strains of Thyrsis, the placement of *dulcior* and *amarior* being especially illustrative (37; 41):

> *Corydon*
> *Nerine Galatea, thymo mihi* ***dulcior*** *Hyblae* …
> --------------
> *Thyrsis*
> *Immo ego Sardoniis videar tibi* ***amarior*** *herbis.*
>
> ("Corydon
> Galatea, child of Nereus, sweeter to me than Hybla's thyme …
> --------------
> Thyrsis
> Nay, let me seem to you more bitter than Sardinian herbs").

The term *umbra*, which similarly pervades the Virgilian corpus, also captures the liminality of bittersweetness. The term is an ambivalent one, ever shifting as it casts its shadows of varying complexion.[13] *Umbra* marks the start of a new day: *Frigida vix caelo noctis decesserat*

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[12] It is a thesis not unrelated to the *labor-fructus* tension explored in several studies on the *Georgics*.

[13] Since first writing this, I have discovered L. N. Quartarone, 'Shifting Shadows on the Landscape', *Acta Ant. Hung*. 53 (2013), 245–59, which explores in detail the semantic and symbolic range of the term *umbra* as well as its relevance for poetical composition. The astute observation in this article that *umbra* is a theme picked up and pursued in the *Culex* is suggestive of its important symbolic charge in the Virgilian corpus. Quartarone's conclusion that Virgil was the first poet to truly deploy the multivalence of *umbra* further points to his preoccupation with shading and nuance, paradox and combination.

umbra (“Scarce had night’s cool shade left the sky”, *Ecl*. 8.14), but it is also marks the chill darkness of night: *Et iam summa procul villarum culmina fumant / maioresque cadunt altis de montibus umbrae* (“Even now the housetops yonder are smoking and longer shadows fall from the mountain heights”, *Ecl*. 1.82–83). In the heat of the summer’s scorching sun, *umbra* affords ease – *lentus in umbra*, (“relaxed beneath the shade”, *Ecl*. 1.4) – and shelter: *et quae vos rara viridis tegit arbutus umbra, / solstitium pecori defendite* (“and the green arbute that shield you with dappled shade, ward the noontide heat from my flock”, *Ecl.* 7.46–47). But it is also a source of harm to men and nature alike – *solet esse gravis cantantibus umbra … nocent et frugibus umbrae* (“The shade is often perilous to the singer … hurtful the shade even to the crops”, *Ecl*. 10.75–76) – and, given its application to the underworld (*Aen*. 6, *passim*, and especially *Aen*. 12, whose final word is *umbras*), a compelling reminder of man’s mortality. In short, *umbra* is a word whose bandwidth extends from protection to detriment, and whose influence causes the poetry to hover between light and darkness. It is an apt image for the human condition of mixed blessings, which, as Virgil deftly shows us, are woven into the hourly chimes of everyday.

In his descriptions of nature, supreme joy and extreme pain are conjoined as a predetermined pair. But Virgil’s poems are as much about people and lives, and he insinuates this *glukupikron*[14] combination into all spheres of our earth-born experience. War, for example, a dimension of life that features so prominently in the *Aeneid*, is suffused with both success and sorrow. The opening of book 11, with its delicate concessive clause, captures the point (2–4):

> *Aeneas, quamquam et sociis dare tempus humandis*
> *praecipitant curae turbataque funere mens est,*
> *vota deum primo victor solvebat Eoo.*
>
> (“Aeneas, though his sorrows urge him to give time for his comrades’ burial and death has confused his soul, yet as the Day Star rose, began to pay the gods his vows of victory”).

The stark and often sudden reversals of fortune on the battlefield, such as those of Pallas, Camilla and eventually Turnus, where exultant ascendancy so quickly becomes collapse, constitute potent symbols of the mingled yard in which we all dwell. A pictorial record of the hopes and despairs in Virgil would look like a fever chart. *Surgit amari aliquid* (“something bitter arises”, Lucr. *DRN* 4.1131), yes, but Virgil’s verse reminds us that Dawn *always*

[14] Literally “sweetbitter”, a Greek coinage of Sappho to describe the paradox of Eros.

rises again: in among the stench of death and the mass burials of book 11, *Oceanum interea surgens Aurora reliquit* ("Meanwhile dawn rose and left the ocean", 1).[15]

Less straightforwardly, Virgil also presents bittersweetness as a more textured chronological phenomenon. On the one hand, happiness is presented as a reverse construct, as something we once knew, the gall being what we experience in the present. So much of Virgil's verse is nostalgic, so that joy is often something recalled, rather than experienced. In *Ecl.* 8, Damon remembers falling in love as a young lad in the tranquillity of a garden on a summer's day (37–41):

> *Saepibus in nostris parvam te roscida mala*
> *(dux ego vester eram) vidi cum matre legentem;*
> *alter ab undecimo tum me iam acceperat annus;*
> *iam fragilis poteram a terra contingere ramos:*
> *Ut vidi, ut perii ...*
>
> ("Within our garden hedge I saw you – I was guide for both – a little child with your mother, gathering dewy apples. My eleventh year ended, the next had just greeted me; from the ground I could now reach the frail boughs. In the moment I saw you, I lost my heart ...").

In *Ecl.* 1 Meliboeus refers heart-wrenchingly to a bygone state of happiness: *Ite meae, felix quondam pecus, ite capellae* ("Away, my goats! Away, once happy flock!", 74). Frequent allusions to the Golden Age function in a similar way: descriptions of the era of Saturn, albeit they conjure collective or mythical memories that have not directly been experienced, are stirring for the very fact that they tally with our own tendencies to look back to a time of happiness.

On the other hand, Virgil's verse also projects happiness on to the future from a position of current bleakness. The Golden Age in Virgil is envisioned as an era to come, just as much as one to look back to. So we read in *Ecl.* 4 of a golden race that will emerge from a *ferrea gens* ("iron race"): *aspice, venturo laetentur ut omnia saeclo* ("see how all things rejoice in the age that is at hand!", 52). Virgil's verse, unlike his predecessors',[16] allowed for the possible *recurrence* of a Golden Age; consequently the notion of bittersweetness is incorporated into his broader framework of rotation and rebirth.

15 See also *Aen*. 11. 182–83.

16 P. A. Johnston, *Vergil's Agricultural Golden Age*, 1980, Leiden, 8. It has been argued elsewhere that the very notion of Golden Age in Virgil is far from stable or unified, and contains its own contradictions, its own bittersweetness: C. Perkell, 'The Golden Age and its Contradictions in the Poetry of Vergil', *Vergilius* 48 (2002), 3–39.

4. Human connections

Considerable space in Virgil’s verse is devoted to solo efforts, but his poems also give voice to a truth that the coronavirus outbreak is again calling attention to: that humans’ individuality is best discharged in community, not independence. Some of the most affecting instances in the *Aeneid* are the simplest. They include the episodes when one person takes another’s hand. The fortifying potentiality of confederation that this gesture represents is expressively contained in *iungimus hospitio dextras et tecta subimus* (“We clasp hands in welcome and pass beneath his roof”, *Aen*. 3.83), with the first person plural verbs emphatically framing the moment of concord. Again in book 8, the great friendship between Aeneas and Pallas is immediately sealed in one of the most moving lines of the entire work: *excepitque manu dextramque amplexus inhaesit* (“And with a grasp of welcome he caught and clung to his hand”, 124). The powerful placement of the two hands next to each other (*manus* and *dextra*) and the strength of feeling implicit in *amplexus inhaesit* capture in one stroke the intense need we all feel for bonds and contact.

Perhaps one of the most meaningful forms of communal activity is song, and Virgil’s poems both enact and convey the power of that shared medium. Many of his *Eclogues*, in particular, are constructed around participation in song. *Alternis dicetis; amant alterna Camenae* (“You must sing alternately; the Muses love alternate verses”, *Ecl*. 3.59). As the repetition of *alternis … alterna* emphasises, antiphonal singing enjoys divine favour, but it is also an activity which, however inherently agonistic, is a cooperative one. In the fifth *Eclogue*, the incorporative *convenimus ambo* (“we have both come together”, 1) sets the tone for the rest of the poem, in which a young man and an old offer alternating ballads about a single subject, Daphnis. Even as choral and musical parts are divided up – *tu calamos inflare levis, ego dicere versus* (“you [are good] at blowing on the slender reeds, I at singing verses”, 2), collaboration is firmly reinforced in the following line: *hic corylis mixtas inter consedimus ulmos?* (“[Why don’t] we sit together here where the hazels mix with elms?”, 3).

Song in concert with others can also help lubricate the grind, as the hauntingly beautiful lines at the end of the ninth *Eclogue* communicate. Here, Lycidas gives voice to an impulse that people have always harboured in bleak times – he suggests that he and Moeris sing together as they go on their way, and that by doing so, they will make the journey less unpalatable (63–65):

> *Aut si, nox pluviam ne colligat ante, veremur,*
> *cantantes licet usque (minus via laedit) eamus;*
> *cantantes ut eamus, ego hoc te fasce levabo.*

> ("Or if we fear that night may first bring on rain, we may yet go singing on our way – it makes the road less irksome. So that we may go singing on our way, I will relieve you of this burden").

The poem in fact ends with Lycidas' older companion, Moeris, checking this youthful proposal. Yet, even as he does so, he keeps alive the prospect of singing in unison all the more heartily in due course: *carmina tum melius, cum venerit ipse, canemus* ("our songs we shall sing the better when the master himself has come", 67). It's only when there is no fellowship and the situation is utterly hopeless that you can say, as does Meliboeus at the end of the first *Eclogue*, *carmina nulla canam* ("I will sing no more songs", 77).

For many, romantic love is, even more than fellowship, the most important realization of human connection. Yet, the Virgilian voice is quiet when it comes to the efflorescence of deep intimacy within a partnership. There are many examples of coupling in his works: Dido and Aeneas, Orpheus and Eurydice, Nisus and Euryalus, but the centre of gravity tends not to be the richness of human union but the tragedy of loss. Dido and Aeneas are briefly lovers, but the impossibility of the match is glaringly obvious from the outset. Even as Aeneas tells his story in books 2 and 3, Dido has already heard him refer – and repeatedly so – to his divinely-ordained mission to get to Italy. At the same time as Aeneas seduces the Queen of Carthage with his reminiscences, he rejects her. In the fourth book of the *Georgics*, Virgil introduces Eurydice as the *dulcis coniunx* of Orpheus ("dear wife", 465), but the dominant focus is on the pain he suffers upon losing her. Even at the moment of reunification (*reddita Eurydice*; "regained Eurydice", 486), Orpheus has already lost her again: retrieval becoming forfeiture in the space of five lines (486–91). The inevitability of loss is emphatically and chillingly conveyed in the repeated use of the prefix *re-* (*reddita … restitit … respexit*; "regained … he halted … he looked back"), which reverberate through this passage like a pain in search of its echo.

It takes us nine books of the *Aeneid* to arrive at anything that we might meaningfully regard as a fulfilling and flourishing relationship based on mutuality and equality, in the shape of Nisus and Euryalus. Virgil draws attention to this feature of their friendship with the words *His amor unus erat pariterque in bella ruebant* ("A common love was theirs; side by side they would charge into battle", 9.182) and he establishes with a compassionate touch the care they hold for one another's welfare, as their joint plans to carve a path to Aeneas in Pallanteum are laid (84–221). But here also, a sense of doom hangs over the episode from the outset, with Euryalus presciently predicting his own mother's tears before the expedition has even begun (289). Ultimately Nisus and Euryalus' love for each other will be played out in a scene of gruesome slaughter.

All the relationships Virgil describes, whether those referred to above, or Aeneas and Creusa in book 2 of the *Aeneid*, or Gallus and Lycoris in *Ecl.* 10, pivot entirely on loss.

In one way, of course, losing a significant other only serves to highlight how precious that person is. Nor am I seeking to suggest that the tragedy of loss is not prevalent in the treatment of relationships in the ancient canon more broadly. But the sheer absence of any accounts of fully-functioning, harmonious unions, and of any exploration of the happiness and gratification they can afford, is striking. There is no obvious equivalent of Odysseus and Penelope in Virgil, no Hector and Andromache, no Baucis and Philemon, no Daphnis and Chloe. We know scarcely anything about Virgil's own life, and even less about his romantic circumstances. Donatus' *Vita* of the fourth century AD tells us that "With regard to pleasure, he was partial to boys ... He loved Cebes and Alexander most of all", but also that Virgil's life was "upright" in its character and he was consequently dubbed *Parthenias* ("The Virgin").[17] With only such scraps of evidence, any formal attempt to eke out from Virgil's verse autobiographical insights would be a clumsy and almost certainly futile exercise. Yet the thought lingers that perhaps Virgil's life was scarred by unrequited love and / or loss. He conveys so well the inherent tragedy of Orpheus' backward glance and how a beloved can slip through one's fingers like thin air, but very little about the love that can flourish and grow without hurry or excess between two partners who have resolved to commit their lives to each other. That the anthropomorphic – and sexless – bee community should be one of the most memorable loci of commingling in the whole of his oeuvre is telling.

5. Human limitation

The final element of Virgil's verse to broach here is human limitation. A primary function of poetry is to make us hesitate. Poetry creates space, and dispossesses us of the illusion that we can always sort matters out. A vital reason why the Maronian corpus strikes a chord is because Virgil shows us, like Job, that individuals must humbly acknowledge the limits of man's wisdom. I suggested above that there was one aspect in Virgil's audit of the human experience that was wholly wanting (namely, romantic love). Yet it is this apparent touch of the imperfect in the almost perfect that serves to inject his works further with the sweetness of their humanity.

In a highly provocative article in the 2017 publication of this journal, Richard Jenkyns probed the phenomenon of the "unspoken" in Virgil.[18] He mounted a strong case for a Virgilian reticence and creation of silences through which the poet's reach might extend into the more instinctive and subterreanean parts of our consciousness. This Virgilian unclarity,

[17] Aelius Donatus, *Life of Virgil*, tr. David Wilson-Okamura, 1996, rev. 2005, 2008, 2014, online at http://virgil.org/vitae/, chs. 8–11. Donatus based his account on an earlier biography by Suetonius.

[18] 'Virgil and the Unspoken', *PVS* 29 (2017), 103–14.

according to Jenkyns, reflects an ambiguity that lies at the core of our existence. I wonder too whether Virgil's own more candid and explicit acknowledgements of limitation capture another truth about mortal capacity. There are moments in his works where Virgil seems to concede openly that full knowledge of the world exceeds his grasp. In the second book of the *Georgics*, for example, he points to the impossibility of tabulating all the grains of sand and all the waves on the sea and, by extension, of comprehending all the types of vines that exist (103–08):

> *Sed neque quam multae species nec nomina quae sint*
> *est numerus: neque enim numero comprendere refert;*
> *quem qui scire velit, Libyci velit aequoris idem*
> *discere quam multae Zephyro turbentur harenae,*
> *aut, ubi navigiis violentior incidit Eurus,*
> *nosse quot Ionii veniant ad litora fluctus.*
>
> ("But for the many kinds [*i.e.* of vines], or the names they bear, there is no numbering – nor, indeed, is the numbering worth the pains. He who would have knowledge of this would likewise want to learn how many grains of sand on the Libyan plain are stirred by the West Wind, or when the East falls in unwonted fury on the ships, to know how many billows of the Ionian sea roll forward to shore").

Even as the passage slights the person who would want to catalogue such information, it also stands as a stark renunciation of command and control over a world which we inhabit but have not created. Later in this book Virgil again admits that he may not attain an understanding of the universe which the Muses reveal, but that he will instead "love the waters and the woods" (483–86):

> *Sin, has ne possim naturae accedere partes*
> *frigidus obstiterit circum praecordia sanguis,*
> *rura mihi et rigui placeant in vallibus amnes,*
> *flumina amem silvasque inglorius.*
>
> ("But if the chill blood around my heart bar me from reaching those realms of nature, let my delight be the country, and the running streams amid the dells – may I love the waters and the woods, though I be unknown to fame").

Against a backdrop in modern times of ever diminishing mystery about the earth we tread, Virgil offers a salutary reminder – as, in fact, does the current pandemic – that the unknown virulently or (more optimistically) verdantly persists. Virgil's poetry yields up so much that can reground and recentre us, but it also channels a sobering message about our urge to manage and explain.

The poems of Virgil thus also stand as a parable of our own powerlessness. The first book of the *Georgics*, which concludes with the image of a charioteer who has lost control of his charges, is a rousing exposition of this helpless state (512–14):

> *... ut cum carceribus sese effudere quadrigae,*
> *addunt in spatia, et frustra retinacula tendens*
> *fertur equis auriga neque audit currus habenas.*
>
> ("... even as when from the starting gates the chariots stream forth and gather speed lap by lap, while the driver, tugging vainly at the reins, is carried along by his steeds, and the car heeds not the curb!")

Virgil understood that there is a limit to our powers, writing in *Ecl.* 8: *dicite, Pierides; non omnia possumus omnes* ("Tell, Pierian maids; we cannot all do everything", 63). Open-endedness is an important feature of his writing generally. Indeed, considerable ink has been spilt over the seeming lack of closure in Virgil's works. Scholars have commented on Virgil's violent struggle against the linear and the inevitable progress of epic teleology, their focal point often being the very abrupt ending of the *Aeneid*. Virgil could not, as Homer could not, accomplish closure, because they were both so sensitive to the fact that the world is so insensitively resistant to being controlled and digested. In the third book of the *Georgics*, Virgil suggests that he is building a temple with his verse (13–39). It is a temple – it seems to me – that pays homage to a power beyond his own compass and his own comprehension. Such a message of impairment goes to the heart of the human condition. Virgil's verse points to the fact that there is more to the world than we know and, in so doing, it provides the most inclusive vision of who we are: the world makes distinctions for no one, and for no one colour, creed, etc.

*

In academic writing, among Virgil's poems, it is the *Georgics* that is generally termed "didactic". I would contend that this is too limited an application: the term should be extended to all his works, for Virgil is a teacher in the fullest and most life-giving sense. As I stated at the outset, the categories of this essay are in no way intended to be self-contained; rather they

merge and bleed into each other and form a unified whole with far-reaching effects. While the Roman context of Virgil's works cannot be ignored, the vision he supplies extends well beyond it. Virgil leads us to nature, helps us to become literate in it, and encourages us to see ourselves as part of it, and it as an extension of ourselves. He forces us to think beyond our own small confines, because the individual components of his poetry chime with every fundamental dynamic of the larger life. He leads our gaze upward and outward, and provides distant glimpses of sublimity and the eternal verities of our own fate in this universe. While a vital lesson embedded in his verse is that we are not the first to confront hardship, he does anything but beat the gentleness out of us. Certainly, he shakes us with the acuity of his insight into the combination of delights and problems that beset us all, offering sensation rather than certainty, but within each episode of black chaos, there is always a chorus call of "Let there be light" to soothe us and to steady us. Although the ability to be loved and to reciprocate love, which for so many of us is the most precious part of being human, is less on display in Virgil than we might hope, the intense appreciation he manifests for the fragility of structures, but also for scope for renovation, and the devotion he exhibits for the world that surrounds us, for the air we breathe, for the ground we walk, for the souls we possess, means that any one of his masterful works functions as the most subtle vehicle for reflection on *our* humanity.

Virgil was emphatically not a Christian, Muslim or Jew, but his writing does have all the hallmarks of a song for God. In many ways, the spirit that underlies all his works gestures to the messages found in the Old Testament book of wisdom, *Ecclesiastes* (3.11–19):

There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens:
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace

> *What do workers gain from their toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*[19]

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[19] Translation: New International Version.