

VIRGIL AND HIS CRITICS

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by Sir John Lockwood, M.A., Ph.D., Ll.D.

Two years ago you listened with exemplary patience to my comments on some strange doctrines that had been propounded about Virgil. Incredulity was my motive. Who could be silent when the process of composition of the Aeneid was reduced to a deliberate mathematical exercise, the medium being the theoretical formula of the Golden Section? Why had we failed for so long to be outspoken about the strange rigmarole of the historico-anthropological extravaganza of Virgil's Mind at Work? I said my say, and hoped that we should escape further inanities and speculative hocus-pocus. In fact, it was my intention to devote my next address to a study of Turnus, and possibly some minor characters in the Aeneid. Had I not been carried away to a long duty-assignment in the tropical climes of South-East Asia last winter, that would have been my theme. But misfortunes never strike singly. Scarcely was I back in my study than a volume of Oxford Addresses on Poetry by the incumbent of the Oxford Chair of Poetry fell into my hands. The volume contained along with three other addresses three Oxford Chair of Poetry Lectures, The Dedicated Poet, The Anti-poet and The Personal Muse. I had no idea what an Anti-poet is. Newspapers, through their literary columns had introduced me to the phrases Anti-novel and Anti-play, but Anti-poet! No. Well, it was with no little surprise, not to say flabbergasted astonishment, that I found that Virgil was the Anti-poet. The lecture was approached with trepidation, suspicion, and fears that Robert Graves was 'at it again'. Now, he is himself a not inconsiderable literary figure. But he has a highly personal way of handling his material. I, Claudius and Claudius the God were entertaining works of fiction, supported by indiscriminate evidence, some reliable, some useless in any ordinary scholarly sense. His work on the classical myths was very much his own, arbitrary and inclined to be fanciful. As a poet, his standing is, I believe, deservedly good. It is as a poet, as much as a professor of poetry, that he ventured into his own particular quicksands of Virgilian criticism.

In passing, I cannot restrain a malicious desire to quote from one of his predecessors as Professor of Poetry, H.W. Garrod, who began a lecture at Harvard thus: "I think it was Seneca who first said, what Ben Jonson and many others have said after him, that the critic of poetry must be himself a poet. I wish I had the learning which would enable me to try out the dictum by a wide survey of the history of criticism. Such meagre half-learning as I have suggests to me that Seneca said either too much or too little. If from a review of the great critical names with which I am most familiar I were disposed to draw inference, really I think it would be that the critic of poetry must be a poet, but not a very good one. Aristotle, greatest of critics, wrote poetry, if a man be said to write poetry who writes an Ode to Virtue. If he was a good poet, he was an unlucky one, for only the critics know that he was a poet at all. The elder Scaliger once one of the authoritative names

in European criticism, was not only a poet, but a prolific one. Yet unless it was the younger Scaliger I do not know who ever thought his poetry good." And later Garrod writes: "The best criticism of other poets which a poet ever gives you is his own poetry." When you have heard a little of what Graves said about Virgil, you will wish that he had remained silent in rightful self-satisfaction over his own poetic productions. Yet the old Adam was still alive. The select biographical details on which he expands some pages are not designed to raise the credit of Virgil. Far from it. The inclusion of what the literary world nowadays chooses to call 'adult' topics is purposely discrediting. Others are just stupidities. What do you make of comments such as this: "Virgil's fear of destructive females explains Juno, Aeneas' persecutrix in the Aeneid; also the savage vilification of Cleopatra, Mark Antony's seductress; and Aeneas' scarcely controlled impulse to butcher Helen of Troy"? Strange conclusion from some words of Suetonius finding a different fault in Virgil.

He declares Virgil to have been completely without interest in the theme of the Georgics, guying him as "this patronizing city-man" and accusing him of "waiving ... factual truth". He even apparently believes that the length of time spent on its composition is adequate testimony to his disenchantment at his task, and has the audacity to say, after referring to Virgil's writing "at the average rate of one line a day" to say "I suspect that clever little Cebes drafted plenty of them". Critical of the whole tone of the Georgics, he goes on to say that "a more honest poet would have anticipated Goldsmith's Deserted Village, in distress that Augustus' victories had dealt another heavy blow to traditional Italian agriculture by further encouraging the growth of large estates run on slave labour". Of the Aeneid as a whole he says that Virgil "accepted the Aeneid commission (i.e., at Augustus' request), though plainly finding this a most uncongenial task". His critical comments on individual passages are petty and for the time being they shall pass unexamined. He swallows easily and joyously the whole Golden Section heresy ('Virgil never consulted the Muse; he only borrowed Apollo's slide rule'). Virgil's anxiety about the post-humous publication of the Aeneid comes out thus. "When Virgil died at the age of fifty-one, worth something like a quarter of a million pounds in modern money, the Aeneid was complete but not yet published. Conscious of its defects, and perhaps (let us be fair to him) repentant, he asked his executors to burn the manuscript." His summing-up of the poet - the Anti-poet - the Apollonian Anti-poet, is singular. "Publius Vergilius Maro, alias Virgil, has for two thousand years exercised an influence over Western culture out of all proportion to his merits either as a human being or as a poet. Virgil's pliability; his subservience; his narrowness; his denial of that stubborn imaginative freedom that the true poets who preceded him had valued; his perfect lack of originality, courage, honour, or even animal spirits - these were the negative qualities which first commended him to government circles, and have kept him in favour ever since." He was charged in The Times on 17th May 1962 as 'hoping with schoolboy zest to annoy the traditionalists by debunking Virgil'. With zest and self-righteous petulance he replied on 22nd May 1962: "The comments on Virgil in my second public lecture were based on biographical and textual data which had, it seems, convinced some of Virgil's contemporaries that, by the subordination of truth to expediency, he was betraying the best Graeco-Latin poetic

tradition. If this view is thought untenable, it should at least be responsibly refuted, not dismissed as mere school-boy naughtiness; especially at a time when attempts to impose political ideologies on poets have become a commonplace under dictatorships even more thorough than that of Virgil's patron Augustus." A good deal of his attack on Virgil derives from preconceived ideas of what is the nature of the true poet. (He takes Skelton as his example.) He distinguishes between Apollonian poetry and Muse poetry - the former being "composed in the forepart of the mind", i.e. - reasonably according to plan, not permitting personal emotions to break the smoothness of the verse, and affording a consciously aesthetic pleasure; the latter coming from the back of the mind; here I must quote his actual words: "An unaccountable product of a trance in which the emotions of love, fear, anger, or grief are profoundly engaged, though at the same time powerfully disciplined; in which intuitive thought reigns supralogically, and personal rhythm subdues metre to its purpose." But, it is fair to ask, does Virgil belong wholly to the disliked Apollonian type? That is the natural conclusion to be drawn from the remark "In my first address I spoke about the dedicated Muse poet, taking John Skelton as my example. Today I shall deal with the Apollonian anti-poet, his precise opposite."

For a moment or two we may take a closer look at the substance of his complaint against Virgil. Graves manifestly has a liking for the fragments of Naevius and for the rhythmic freedom of the native Saturnian metre. I do not understand why he declares that Naevius' successors and Virgil's predecessors "shamefacedly renounced their natural ballad inheritance and went all Greek". What justification is there for "shamefacedly"? In his view "shamefully" or even "shamelessly" might be right; but is there any good evidence that they felt shame about the direction in which they were taking Latin poetry?

And now I want to turn for a time from the nihilistic, condemnatory prejudices of Robert Graves, to the views expressed by another poet - not a less eminent performer - T.S. Eliot, in an address to the Society in 1944, if we are still to accept the prescriptive right of poets to be regarded as arbiters in the criticism of poets. How different was the more modest approach of Eliot to Virgil: no specialised knowledge or proficiency can confer the exclusive title to talk about Virgil. "Speakers of the most diverse capacities can bring his poetry to bear upon matters within their competence; can hope to contribute, from those studies to which they have given their minds, to the elucidation of his value; can try to offer, for the general use, the benefit of whatever wisdom Virgil may have helped them to acquire, in relation to their own experience of life." I have little doubt that Graves could query the estimate which Eliot makes of Virgil on the ground that Eliot was not discussing Virgil qua poet but rather qua classic. After all, Eliot's subject was "What is a Classic?" But, in the course of his exposition of his ideas of a Classic, which is only in part devoted to Virgil, Eliot has things to say about Virgil which are significant for our present purpose. He is silent about the qualities, the Muse aspects, of a poet to which Graves attaches supreme importance, not necessarily, or even probably, because he would deny them to Virgil, but because in any great poet, certainly in a poet like Virgil or Shakespeare,

such qualities are taken for granted. Graves has left us rather in the dark on the whole question of the poetic gift of Virgil, of his capacity for the lyrical and, in the modern idiom, the elegiac, which apparently represents the true form of poetry. Yet by implication, in his sharp attack on the extent to which Virgil, as it were by a deliberate and decisive act, based on a toadying attitude to the political and military powers of his time, distorted the true line of development of Roman poetry, he does not exclude the possibility that, but for alleged weaknesses of character, he could have been a genuine devotee of the Muse in the Gravesian sense. Graves, in spite of being a poet, must be a more insensitive reader than could have been thought possible, if he has read much of the Aeneid (and even, dare I say, of the Georgics?) without experiencing that frisson or grue which is the physical mark of the effect of Muse poetry. Where Graves seems to be in error is in his assumption that the sensation of the poet-creator in the moment of composition, the non-rational logically inexplicable disturbance of his consciousness, should be automatically recreated in the reader in its undisciplined form. Graves had spoken of the powerful disciplining of the emotions of the Muse poet. Virgil, better than most, succeeds through the majesty and elegance of his disciplined transmission of his own profound emotional experiences. Not for him happily the raw slices of life from the muddle and confusion of the sub-conscious which sometimes pass for the perfection of realism in the world of beatniks and "angry young men" (If the outpourings of these latter were a little more disciplined, they might be more convincing.)

But, to return to Eliot. When I first read his lecture on its publication, I was inclined to think it rather thin and insubstantial. But the passage of time, which, I hope, has not weakened my judgment more than is to be naturally expected, and opportunities for wider reading and for increasingly detached contemplation have reformed the first impressions of nearly 20 years ago. To read the lectures of Graves and Eliot together is in itself a salutary exercise, even when discounting the different objectives of their discourses. Graves seems petty, cheap, almost adolescent; Eliot balanced, experienced, fair, and unprejudiced. The first, and in many ways an especially important point which Eliot makes is that Virgil possesses all the qualities which go to make a true classic. This, as Eliot rightly says, does not entitle us to believe Virgil to have been the greatest poet of all time. It is not part of this present address to establish priorities among poets or even to pick a world Eleven or Fifteen, and Virgil will for the nonce be as Eliot sees him. Of the classical qualities which he has in mind that which he calls maturity is not only essential; it also, in a sense, comprehends all others. Put negatively, the principle can be stated that no classic is possible before a civilization has achieved full maturity. Such maturity, for a poet, means that the language and literature of his country are mature, that they have grown to full stature through the work of a succession of writers, who have brought them to the point where the hand of the master-poet alone is awaited. The master poet will not only have in his grasp a mature language, but maturity of mind and manners. One simple comment of Eliot here is of some force. "We may expect the language to approach maturity at the moment when it has a critical sense of the past, a confidence in the present, and no conscious doubt of the future"! This might sound like the advocacy of a kind of deliberate conformity to a clearly visible line of tradition. But the backward-

looking writer, the true conformist, is never a classic. One part of Virgil's greatness rests in the way in which, without any obvious conscious act or decision he is able to keep a happily poised balance between the whole of Rome's literary tradition and the living creativeness of his own day.

Now we have reached the point where Graves and Eliot are farthest apart. Eliot, having said that maturity of mind demands history and a real consciousness of history, goes on to say that "Consciousness of history cannot be fully awake, except where there is other history than the history of the poet's own people; we need this in order to see our own place in history. There must be the knowledge of the history of at least one highly civilised people, and of a people whose civilisation is sufficiently cognate to have influenced and entered into our own ... Virgil, like his contemporaries and predecessors, was constantly adapting and using the discoveries, traditions, and inventions of Greek poetry; ... we can say that no poet has ever shown a finer sense of proportion than Virgil, in the uses he made of Greek and of earlier Latin poetry". Eliot can see virtue in Virgil's borrowing from his predecessors. Graves finds them merely plagiarisms; "Nor did he ever invent where he could borrow" - an extraordinarily wild assertion based on no solid ground. The search for sources and influences in the case of most poets is an old game. In Virgil's own case it goes back to the anthology of his 'thefts' made by Perellius Faustus and the eight volumes of *Ἵμοιοδότης* compiled by Quintus Octavius Avitus. If you want to see the relics of these early exercises, they can be found in Servius' commentary and the Sixth book of the *Saturnalia* of Macrobius. Eliot can see as a subject for admiration Virgil's "command of the complex structure, both of sense and sound", which he developed without any loss of the "resource of direct, brief and startling simplicity when the occasion required it". Graves seems to see in Virgil's way of employing language and diversifying the form of expression too much crude rhetoric and artificiality, too much distortion of the natural genius of Latin and Latin poetry, too much obedience to a bad tradition. You must be tired of quotations. But it is better to convict him out of his own mouth. The quotations will be a little disjointed but, I hope, fairly selected. Ennius is the first villain of his piece. "Ennius, the first Roman (so far as I know) to experiment with a quantitative hexameter, became the step-father of Latin poetry; educating it by sternly suppressing its natural inclinations ... In establishing his new metre, Ennius had to create a special poetic vocabulary of dialect or obsolete forms to assist versification." And so we get the revival of the old hardy criticisms of the devices for finding substitutes for names like "*Domitius Ahenobarbus*" or words like "*audiunt*" which will not fit into hexameters. "Virgil employed numerous other tricks and evasions for supplying manageable words. Also ... he further divorced poetry from common sense by the exploitation of "poetic licence". (Since when has common sense been the right criterion for poetry of any kind?)

"An 'olde worlde' vocabulary, unnatural grammatical inversions, and poetic licence were among the many curses bequeathed to English Apollonian poetry by the Virgil cult. Nevertheless Latin accentual verse remained fixed in popular song - the Legions used it - and eventually triumphed in such sacred chants as *Dies irae Dies illa* and in drinking songs like *Mihi est propositum in taberna mori.*"

"Virgil's four principal predecessors, the poets Naevius, Ennius, Lucretius and Catullus, were men of determination, and had something urgent to say." "His (i.e., Ennius') surviving verse fragments show a tough spirit and imaginative magnificence." "Lucretius faced linguistic problems that had not troubled Ennius, but his passion often broke through the philosophic argument in lines of unmistakable beauty." "Catullus had learned from the Alexandrian critics that all long poems have their boring passages, and that to bore is the worst crime that a poet can commit. He therefore wrote no epics, constantly varied his metres, and did not let metrical difficulties thwart the plain sense of a poem by driving him to clever periphrasis Catullus expressed his loves, hates, etc. with absolute freedom." "The timorous, inoffensive Virgil, in contrast, found so little to say of personal value that the themes of both his best-known poems, The Georgics and The Aeneid, were forced on him by patrons. He never lampooned those in power, and never got into scrapes. He bartered his talent for social security; and wrote only hexameters - to which, for the sake of elegance, he applied new constrictive rules." When Graves says in the preface to the Addresses that "my strictures on Virgil were received without audible protest", he can surely not be justified in the unspoken but clearly intended conclusion that his audience was so naive, so unsophisticated, or so ignorant as to accept their sense or their truth. Silent audiences are not necessarily assenting audiences - I can draw no safe inferences from your silence so far today.

What I have said about Graves has perhaps created an impression that Eliot's Lecture by contrast is wholly right about Virgil. It is urgent that I recall my earlier comment that Eliot was discussing the nature of a classic and demonstrating within a very limited compass of time and description the major elements in Virgil which supported his title to be respected as a universal classic. He was not talking about Virgil's poetry in any wider or more detailed way. He was not, in essence, attempting a penetrative assessment of Virgil as a poet. We may wish that he had done the latter so that a more complete comparison of the critical attitudes to Virgil of two of our contemporary poets might have been possible, in the hope of exploring the validity of the assumption that a poet is self-evidently the only truly qualified judge of poetry. It would also have been valuable to have the views of A.E. Housman, but he unfortunately never wrote them down and cautiously refrained from expressing them publicly; it is fair to conjecture that he would have been nearer to Eliot than to the destructive Graves.

Virgil has not been short of commentators and admirers. Under the shock of the Oxford Lecture, it was a reassuring delight to pick up the Oxford text and read again the real poet and to thrust out of mind this sawdust travesty which the Lecture had conjured up from a modern poet's jaundiced judgment. It was a pleasure to turn back through the classical periodicals to read what the wise and learned scholar-analysts have written about him. Even in such matters as the use of rhetorical devices, scholars who are often pretty good judges, have fairly estimated their poetic value in the Aeneid. I was glad to be taken back to Professor Austin's article in the Classical Quarterly of some thirty-four years ago on 'Virgilian Assonance'. He describes Virgil as "in reality the most rhetorical of all the classical Latin poets". Nobody who is familiar (as this Society is) with Professor Austin's sensitive understanding of Virgilian verse would feel this description as denunciatory. There is one of his comments which I must give you. "It is a little odd that it should have

been left to Virgil, the recluse who shrank from the artificiality and loudness of the life of *causidicus*, to realise the possibilities of one of the tricks of rhetoric, to call it nothing better, which had long been proved in prose. One has only to compare the prose of Cicero, on the one hand, with that of writers such as Apuleius or Fronto or Tertullian on the other, to see how, when freed from the control of a master-hand it could so easily degenerate into a semblance of Swinburnian narcotic, rich but ranting."

It was a joy, too, to return again to the two chapters in Bowra's From Virgil to Milton - 'Some Characteristics of Literary Epic' and 'Virgil and the Ideal of Rome' with their subtly attractive examination of the many facets of the Aeneid and of the poet's vision of life that combine to give the poem its appeal alike to the intelligence and to the feelings, alike to the moral sense and to the social instinct. Reading Bowra again after eighteen years has (surprisingly to me) somehow transformed my attitude to his chapters. On first reading, they seemed to contain little, if anything, that was new or particularly striking. Yet now their lack of novelty of criticism counts for nothing, because the truth of much of his appreciation of Virgil's personal philosophy and of the shape that it takes in the poem is compensation enough.

And what of Mackail's edition? The most readable that there is, not over-complicated with notes, introduced with the affectionate feeling of a poetic mind, disciplined but free. Taking it from my shelves and opening it once more after a too long interval, I was able to recapture the delighted excitement of the day when I acquired it years ago, and the regard for Mackail's tact and sensibility which then possessed me. It brought back, too, the remembrance of the year when we celebrated the Bimillenary of Virgil's birth, when here in London John Sparrow read a fascinating paper on the Dido episode, in which he sought to show that what fault there was in the relations between Dido and Aeneas was Dido's and Mackail, who was in the chair, spent almost as long in demolishing with perfect critical discretion and literary power this unorthodoxy.

And having thought again of the enthusiasms of that year, I picked up again a slim forgotten volume of three addresses by American scholars in that year of celebration. Mr. C.G. Osgood began his address on 'Virgil and the English Mind' by saying, "We are met to wish Publius Virgilius Maro many happy returns of the day. Not that he is greatly in need of our encouragement. To be hale and hearty and still going strong ... renders our wishes, however cordial, a bit superfluous." (O Graves, where is thy sting?) But I did not mention Osgood only for his exordium. He has a passage when, though disfigured by a pair of unnecessarily odd similes, expresses something of what creates Virgil's universality and continuing modernity. Eliot did not quite come down to the discrimination of these universal elements, but they are, I believe, implicit in his concept of 'comprehensiveness'. Eliot in the place where he deals with 'comprehensiveness' is almost propounding a philosophy of the history of literature. Osgood is moving in the more pedestrian sphere of literary history and literary relevance to the old world and the new. "For when all is said - and a good deal has been said in the course of these two thousand years - it is Virgil's peculiar distinction to stand pre-eminent as a towering mountain isthmus between the Ancient and the Modern world. Other thoroughfares there are, but Virgil's is the high road, the beaten path, by which the subtlest and the most precious influences have passed from the old

civilization to the making of the new. As a poet he chose such themes as enabled him to gather an immense store of heroic legend, mythology, ritual, ideas, and tradition out of the dim past, already antique to him. He grows out of the old heroic poetry as a flourishing oak out of the stump of a primeval forest monarch. But with all these matters he mingles interests, and motives, and passions, which speak to the modern mind in its own idiom. His keen interest in physical science and natural causes is modern; his mastery of the grand passion and its subtleties is modern; his sense of the mystery and beauty of Nature and his love of lowly and homely life, his warm humanity, his eye for the picturesque, his sentimentality at times - all these are modern." These are sensible remarks. They are not the product of *parti-pris*, of prejudice or uncontrolled favour.

As I glance over what I have written and what I have quoted, the realisation occurs to me that I have neglected to define, except by the vaguest implication, what the good critic should be and do. Graves showed what he should not be, because, so far as he did anything positive at all, he applied to Virgil a fixed critical standard which is inappropriate and irrelevant. Criticism does not rely on a single unvarying yardstick. To test what is often called literary poetry by the criterion applicable to so-called authentic poetry invalidates the whole critical operation. Now, too late, I see that I ought to have followed a different line in this address. My theme should have been: What constitutes a good Virgilian critic? Perhaps you will invite someone to answer that question one day.

We have all read and heard a wide range of commentary on every side of Virgil's poetry and purpose. We all form our own judgments. We are affected by our literary taste and by the arbitrary limitations of our experiences among books and authors. Each is his own best critic, since it is the degree and depth of personal satisfaction which determines the reality and honesty of one's critical estimates. Nothing, from however authoritative a source it may originate, should persuade us against our own inner feelings and convictions.

I.A. Richards, a formidable writer on criticism, succinctly said "The qualifications of a good critic are three. He must be an adept at experiencing, without eccentricities, the state of mind relevant to the work of art he is judging. Secondly, he must be able to distinguish experiences from one another as regards their less superficial features. Thirdly, he must be a sound judge of values." Whether these three qualifications fall short of what a critic should possess, you will best be able to judge. They need, of course, a good deal of explanation, and I have never been quite sure that I understood Richards' effort to do so.

Of Virgil himself, we will all make our individual appraisals of his achievement in the several parts of his works. But I have no doubt that there will be unanimity among us here today in agreeing with Mr. Patric Dickinson, who in introducing his translation of the Aeneid says: "My own starting-point is that the Aeneid is a poem to be enjoyed." We have enjoyed it and will go on enjoying it, and no Philistines or iconoclasts from Mallorca and Oxford will stop us.