Vergil as a Poet of War

Most literate Anglophones of the present day, pressed to name a war-poet, would probably come up with the name of a poet of one of the two World Wars of this century, Wilfred Owen, Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon or Keith Douglas, to name but a few amongst many. The common picture of war-poetry is essentially the reaction of educated young men to the prospect of battle or to the horrors of the war-zone into which they are thrust—in both cases a world strongly contrasting with that of their other experiences. This generalization is of course not strictly true (one thinks of the First World War poetry of the middle-aged Housman and the septuagenarian Hardy, both writing at home in England), but it points an appropriate double contrast with the world of classical antiquity in general and with that of first century BC Rome in particular, a world which we must endeavour to re-enter for a proper appreciation of Vergil as a war-poet. Two statements could safely be made concerning educated Roman society at that period which would not be true of contemporary Britain: first, basic experience of military campaigning was widespread amongst the literate population, and second, poetry on the subject of war was not only common but respected as the highest form of literature. A young man of the educated upper class at Rome would expect to serve a term as a junior officer in a provincial army, partly for military experience and partly for self-enrichment; good examples are the unlikely soldiers Catullus, who served under Memmius in Bithynia in the 50s BC but failed to increase his bank-balance (Catullus 10 and 28), Tibullus, who seems to have gone with Messalla on his Eastern expedition after Actium, only to fall ill at Corfu *en route* (Tibullus 1.3), and Cicero, who, though a reluctant and unmilitary governor of Cilicia in 51–50 BC, engaged the enemy and won a victory or two (Cicero Att. 5.20).

Thus the violence of war and the rigours of military life would be well-known to many of Vergil's readers through personal experience—certainly not the case for modern readers of Wilfred Owen, for whom the impact of these factors is considerable. As I have already suggested,

they consequently had a different attitude to the depiction of war in literature. For the poets and readers of First World War poetry, the harsh facts of war are remote from the general practices of society, and therefore shocking when fully revealed; for the Romans, such things were a common element of life, not only through the role of military experience as part of the social framework, but also through the frequent watching of gladiatorial shows, in effect mock wars staged for general delectation. Most Romans went to the games, and gladiatorial allusions and imagery are a natural feature in Roman writers, especially the poets.[1] War was similarly a matter of entertainment when written down: the literature of war would be read by a market of connoisseurs, and this literature included not only direct reports of actual fighting, such as we see enshrined in literary form in the Commentarii of Julius Caesar, but epic poetry on martial subjects with detailed battle-descriptions.

A strain of martial epic runs through the whole of Roman literature, from Naevius in the second century BC to Corippus in the sixth AD; indeed, Roman writers tend to define epic subject-matter as 'kings and battles'.[2] though poets such as Lucretius had produced long hexameter poems on non-military subjects (such length and metre being more generally the requirements for epic in antiquity[3]).

As a highly practical race, the Romans saw martial epic not only as an appropriate form of entertainment for a military-minded people, but also as a means to two socially valuable ends: the glorification of the Roman state, enlarged and preserved by continuous warfare, and the laudation of its outstanding individuals, great generals all and examples for the future. Sometimes these ends could be dealt with separately, as in the case of Ennius, who wrote a separate panegyric of Scipio Africanus as well as his monumental *Annales*, which traced the rise of Rome through miltary might from its humble beginnings to the status of a world power. More often they were dealt with together: the typical Roman military epic was the history of an important campaign, written for the benefit of a particular general. Thus in the first century BC we hear of an epic by the poet Archias, famously defended by Cicero, on the exploits of Lucullus in the Mithradatic Wars,[4] and two poems on the military achievements of Caesar, one by Furius which seems to have dealt with the Gallic War in general, perhaps as part of a longer poem,[5] and another by Varro of Atax which chronicled the so-called *Bellum Sequanicum* of 58 BC, Caesar's first Gallic campaign.[6] In Vergil's own

time, another Caesar naturally took the centre of the stage, Octavian/ Augustus: we know little of the *Panegyricus Augusti* of Varius, friend of Vergil and Horace, but our evidence suggests that it contained some military matter;[7] similarly, the lost work of Cornelius Severus on the Sicilian War of 38–6 BC, whether it was a separate epic or part of a longer work,[8] no doubt included substantial praise for Octavian, who celebrated an ovation on the successful conclusion of that war.

Beginning the Aeneid in the 20s BC, Vergil was thus faced with powerful precedents in Roman literature for military epic based on historical, usually contemporary, events, with a panegyrical function for both state and individual, and certain demands and expectations from literary consumers. This was his inheritance as a Roman; as a poet he also felt the weight of an even greater authority—that of Homer. Homer, prince and principal of poets, was also the greatest writer of martial epic in the form of the *Iliad*, and the form of martial epic concerning the legendary period of which he was the earliest representative had been influential ever since. Here too was a poem with great descriptions of miltary activity, usually hand-to-hand fighting, written like Roman epics for a war-like society which appreciated the finer details of combat; the difference between its legendary material and the historical basis of the traditional Roman epic was not as sharply perceived in antiquity as it is today. This dual pressure of Rome and Homer resulted in a poem which on the surface combines the essential qualities of both traditions. The *Aeneid* centres about a legendary hero rather than a contemporary one, but the greatest of contemporary figures is far from absent; equally, it concerns events which are distant chronologically from Vergil's own time, but which are constantly shown to be crucial antecedents to the military achievements of his own day.

This novel combination may be seen as a natural modification of the Roman tradition given the characteristics of Vergil himself. Hardly a conventional Roman, he was born in Mantua, an area described by the poet himself as possessing three different racial traditions (probably meaning Etruscan, Gaulish and Italic[9]) and only included in the Roman citizenship by Julius Caesar in 49 BC when the poet was twenty-one.[10] Thus by birth he did not necessarily share traditional Roman views and assumptions; by choice he seems to have inclined towards the culture and values of Greece, and in later years he seems to have preferred to

reside in the highly Hellenized area of Naples rather than in Rome itself (cf. Georgics 4.563–4). His poetic career before the *Aeneid*, too, does not necessarily point to a future writer of Roman epic: conscious imitations of Greek models, Theocritus in the *Eclogues* and Hesiod and Aratus in the *Georgics*, are conjoined with a new awareness of the subtleties of poetic style emanating from the neoteric poets of Rome and ultimately from the Hellenistic Greek poets of Alexandria. However, both these earlier works show some concern with politics and national issues, and with the dominating figure of Augustus, and the *Aeneid* seems a logical next step. Vergil's epic, like his previous essays in pastoral and didactic, follows a Greek model in the form of Homer, but combines this with some elements of the Roman epic tradition. This is partly a matter of style, for the *Aeneid* constantly harks back to the archaic language of Ennius, particularly in its battle-descriptions, but it is also a question of purpose and content. Like the *Bellum Punicum* of Naevius and the *Annales* of Ennius, the *Aeneid* is a national epic celebrating the rise of Rome, but it also follows Ennius' *Scipio* and Archias' epic on Lucullus, and more particularly the epics of Varius and Cornellus Severus on the achievements of Augustus, in praising in three prominent prophetic passages and in occasional analogies with Aeneas the successes of a contemporary great man—that same Augustus.

Thus the traditional readership of Roman epic, brought up to an appreciation of war for Rome in life and literature, would have found much familiar about the *Aeneid*. But much would have seemed misleading and unconventional—a consequence of the poet's origins outside traditional Roman aristocracy, his saturation with the poetry and culture of Greece and his originality and complexity as a literary artist. A closer look at the poem itself will illustrate the point. The familiar opening of the poem is interesting here:

> arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris
> Italiam fato profugus Laviniaque venit
> litora, multum ille et terris iactatus et alto
> vi superum, saevae memorem Iunonis ob iram,
> multa quoque et bello passus, dum conderet urbem
> inferretque deos Latio; genus unde Latinum
> Albanique patres atque altae moenia Romae.

> I sing of arms and a man—the first man to come from Troy's shores to Italy, a fated wanderer to the Lavinian coast; storm-tossed he on land and sea by force of the gods, for the sake of the mindful anger of Juno, and suffering also much in war, until he could found a city and bring his gods to Latium. From him came the Latin people, the fathers of Alba, and the walls of lofty Rome.

The famous 'arma virumque' suggest a poem about war and an outstanding individual, a description suiting both the Roman and Homeric traditions, while the subsequent emphasis on the growth of the nation founded by Aeneas to the ultimate greatness of Rome ('altae moenia Romae') has the familiar nationalistic flavour of Ennius and Naevius. As a programme to the *Aeneid*, this preface is in fact misleading; the emphasis on war, reflecting the Roman tradition, is not as strong in the poem as its introduction suggests. Most obviously, there is little fighting in the first 'Odyssean' half of the poem; its only military interest is in the sack of Troy in Book 2, where Aeneas involves himself in desperate and irresponsible resistance to the triumphant Greeks until brought to a realization of his destiny and proper concerns by his witness of the death of Priam, recalling the father and family he has abandoned, and the epiphany of his mother Venus, who reveals to him that Troy is suffering a fated and divinely-sponsored fall. This is some way from the canons of Roman historical epic, designed for the celebration of Roman victories: Aeneas, the proto-Roman general, is here on the losing side, and fails to show the rational planning and controlled courage held up as Roman military ideals. Thus far not much for the connoisseur of Roman epic.

It has commonly been argued that *arma virumque* is not a misleading description of the *Aeneid*, claiming that the phrase describes the two halves of the poem in reverse order, *arma* applying to the more military and 'Iliadic' Books 7–12, and *virum* to the 'Odyssean' 1–6, in which Aeneas' journey to Italy is related and his character established. There is some plausibility to this view, but even in the second half of the poem the predominance of fighting is not as extensive as one is led to expect. In Book 7 we have a new preface, which like that of Book 1 stresses the centrality of the military theme (7.41–5) :

> dicam horrida bella,
> dicam acies actosque animis in funera reges,

> Tyrrhenamque manum totamque sub arma coactam
> Hesperiam. maior rerum mihi nascitur ordo,
> maius opus moveo.
>
> I shall tell of terrible wars, and of armies, and of kings driven by passions to death, of the banded Etruscans and of all Italy compelled to arms. A greater order of events now comes to birth for me, and a greater work I stir forth.

However, this new preface also resembles that of Book 1 in being in one sense misleading. Its superficial stress on wars, armies, and kings and their peoples in battle suggests that what follows will be essentially a catalogue of battles and military achievements in the manner of the later books of Ennius' *Annales*; what we actually get is something rather different.

One of the most notable features of the second half of the *Aeneid*, when considered from this angle, is the way in which the poet avoids actual description of fighting until the last possible moment; a programme of war is announced at the beginning of Book 7 and war duly begins in that book, but the poet's detailed description of the conflict does not begin until Book 9. The 'real' start of fighting is effectively and plausibly held back, after the complex of events surrounding the inception of the war, the assembly of Italian allies for Turnus and Aeneas' answering search for an an alliance with Evander and the Etruscans, but held back it is, defeating the expectation of the modern reader and disappointing the anticipated pleasure of the Roman connoisseur of war. This pattern of restricting the actual amount of fighting described in the *Aeneid* is visible not only in the overall structure of the second half of the poem, but also within each individual book. Thus even in Book 9 there is no description of actual conflict until the night-expedition of Nisus and Euryalus (314 ff.); Turnus' attempt earlier in the book to burn the Trojan ships is supernaturally foiled by Cybele, and no clash between the two armies takes place since the Trojans keep to their camp in the absence of Aeneas. Similarly, in Book 10 the action is postponed by a divine council until line 118; the fighting resumes thereafter for less than thirty lines and is then interrupted by the Etruscan Catalogue, resuming only when Aeneas lands over a hundred lines later. In Book 11 the burial-truce and Latin Council take up half the book, and war is only resumed

at 447, while in 12 Turnus' arming-scene and the formalities of the duel-truce postpone the fighting until 257 ff. Such reluctance to get down to the details of fighting contrasts strongly with Homer in the *Iliad*, of which only six books out of twenty-four, including the first and last pairs of books which clearly balance each other in this respect, are not wholly dominated by the detail of battle-scenes.

Why this strategy of avoidance? A possible explanation which seems to underlie at least some modern views on the *Aeneid* is that the cultured and civilised Vergil, by contrast with his contemporary Roman readership, had a squeamish distaste for the 'blood and guts' descriptions of wounds and fighting traditional in both Roman and Homeric epic and was consequently concerned to avoid them as much as possible. This view seems to be superficially supported by the quantitative argument just outlined, i.e. that Vergil seems reluctant to describe the details of combat and has proportionally less of this than Homer, but qualitative considerations, i.e. the degree of gore and violence in the battle-scenes which Vergil actually includes, need to be brought into play. Let us take some examples from each of the four books in which fighting plays a real part—9, 10, 11 and 12.

In Book 9 Turnus, with Aeneas absent on his expedition up the Tiber to find allies, reigns supreme on the battle-field, matching the Hector of the *Iliad* in the absence of Achilles. There is substantial fighting, during which Mezentius kills a Sicilian fighting on the Trojan side with a sling-shot (9.588–9):

> et media adversi liquefacto tempora plumbo
> diffidit, ac multa porrectum extendit harena.

> And he pulped the middle of his opponent's forehead with the lead
> and split it apart, laying his enemy stretched out in a cloud of sand.

The description is short but graphic—no squeamishness evident here. It is mild stuff compared to Turnus' killing of Antiphates with a spear, which follows at 698–701:

> volat Itala cornus
> aera per tenerum stomachoque infixa sub altum
> pectus abit; reddit specus atri vulneris undam

> spumantem, et fixo ferrum in pulmone tepescit.
>
> The Italian spear-shaft flew through the soft air, and piercing his stomach, sped on deep into his chest: the cavern of the dark wound gave out a foaming billow [of blood], and the iron weapon fixed in his lung and grew warm.

The anatomical precision, here as often not greatly plausible (stomach, chest and lung?), not only points back to Homer, keen on identifying parts of the body in wounds,[11] but no doubt appeals to the taste of a Roman readership familiar with hand-to-hand combat and gladiatorial spectacle. The metaphors of the cavernous wound and the billow of blood add vividness rather than literary colour, and these together with the final warming of the spear in the lung produce a gory scene of great effect. Similarly unsqueamish is Turnus' killing of Pandarus with a sword (750–4):

> et mediam ferro gemina inter tempora frontem
> dividit ... / ... /
> conlapsos artus atque arma cruenta cerebro
> sternit humi moriens ...
>
> And he sliced with his sword through the middle of the other's forehead, between his two temples ... the other, dying, cast to the ground his collapsing limbs and his armour bloodied with his brains.

Sliced foreheads we have already seen; scattered brains are something of a favourite for Vergil, an inheritance from Homer (e.g. *Iliad* 11.97–8, 17.297–8, 20.399–400).

Examples from Book 10 are similar. At 340–41 Alcanor, aiding his brother, is struck down by the same weapon which has passed through his brother's body:

> protinus hasta fugit servatque cruenta tenorem,
> dexteraque ex umero nervis moribunda pependit.
>
> The spear flew on and kept its course, now bloodied, and his right

> arm hung lifeless by its sinews from the shoulder.

The source is again Homeric (*Iliad* 16.323–4), as is the use of the spear as subject of the verb (e.g. *Iliad* 3.357–8, 5.65–7, 7.251–2); severed arms are common in Vergil as well as Homer (*Iliad* 5.81–2). Indeed, at 395–6 in this same book Pallas has cut off the arm of a certain Larides, and describes the severed arm in a well-known passage which seems to owe much to several previous Roman poets (cf. Ennius *Annales* fr. 483–4 Skutsch, Lucretius 3.652–3):

> te decisa suum, Laride, dextera quaerit
> semianimesque micant digiti ferrumque retractant.
>
> Your severed right arm, Larides, misses its master, and its dying fingers quiver and grasp again at the sword.

The grotesqueness of the passage is patent; if there is pathos here, it is tinged with a certain grim humour. Again one suspects an appeal to Roman taste for scenes from the arena rather than a straightforward echoing of Homer, who has nothing quite similar to this. A final exampie from Book 10, Halaesus' dispatching of two warriors on the Trojan side (414–6):

> Strymonio dextram fulgenti deripit ense
> elatam in iugulum, saxo ferit ora Thoantis
> ossaque dispersit cerebro permixta cruento.
>
> Strymonius' right arm, raised to attack his own throat, he whipped off with his shining sword, and he struck the face of Thoas with a rock, scattering wide bone mixed with bloody brains.

Here two favourite motifs are combined: the severed arm and the scattered brains.

Book 11 continues the trend. Here the warrior maiden Camilla, seen at other times as young, glamorous and with a taste for elegant things, shows the other side of her personality as a ruthless killer, dispatching various victims with glee. Amongst these is Eunaeus, struck by a spear in the chest (668–9):

> sanguinis ille vomens rivos cadit atque cruentam
> mandit humum moriensque suo se in vulnere versat.
>
> he fell, retching streams of blood, and bit the bloody dust, and as he died writhed about his own wound.

The metaphor of 'streams of blood' is already familiar; 'biting the ground' is Homeric (e.g. *Iliad* 22.17), but Vergil has added the final touch of the victim writhing in pain—no doubt a familiar sight in the arena. Another of Camilla's victims strikes a similarly familiar note (696–8) :

> tum validam perque arma viro perque ossa securim
> altior exsurgens oranti et multa precanti
> congeminat: vulnus calido rigat ora cerebro.
>
> then, rising higher, she doubled her blows with her mighty axe, striking through the man's armour and bone as he supplicated and beseeched her with many words: the wound soaked his face with warm brains.

Book 12 provides two final examples, both connected with Turnus. At 339–40 Turnus drives his chariot over corpses:

> spargit rapida ungula rores
> sanguineos mixtaque cruor calcatur harena.
>
> the flying hooves scattered dews of blood, and gore was trampled in to mix with the sand.

This is impressionistic, but vivid enough, concentrating on the idea of blood which occurs twice in this short passage. Striking in content rather than language is our final example, where Turnus kills two opponents and keeps their heads as a trophy (12.510–12):

> hunc venientem cuspide longa,
> hunc mucrone ferit, curruque abscissa duorum
> suspendit capita et rorantia sanguine portat.

> the one he struck down charging with his long spear, the other with his sword, and hung the severed heads of the two of them on his chariot, carrying them around dripping with blood.

It is the shocking fact of displaying heads which strikes the reader here: only 'rorantia sanguine' is explicitly gory, and the act of decapitation is swiftly passed over.

This lengthy catalogue of horrors is surely more than sufficient to refute any notion that Vergil is reluctant to pursue the harsher details of war; on the contrary, he expends considerable artistic energy on them, varying a number of bloody themes which he considers dramatically effective to achieve grotesquely vivid effects. Thus we cannot explain Vergil's comparative avoidance of battle-details on the grounds of personal distaste; we must therefore look for another reason.

Here we must return for a moment to the *Iliad* of Homer. As mentioned earlier, eighteen of that poem's twenty-four books, three-quarters of the work, are more or less devoted to detailed descriptions of fighting. Readers of Homer tend to select and remember the numerous compelling passages from this vast tract of battle-narrative, the duels of Paris and Menelaus and of Ajax and Hector, the successes of Diomedes and Agamemnon, the deaths of Sarpedon, Patroclus and Hector, but a continuous perusal of the whole *Iliad* leads inevitably to the view that the details of war are unmanageable on such a scale in poetry. Even Homer's great genius for individualizing victims and for organizing battles in patterns, two factors emphasized in recent years,[12] fails to hold out over three hundred pages of combat, and there are undoubtedly considerable passages of tedium in the poem. These might not have affected the original audience, who would have probably heard the *Iliad* recited only in particular sections rather than all the way through at once, but was a serious factor for Vergil, by whose time epic poetry was decidedly literary, something to be read continuously on the page. Callimachus and Apollonius of Rhodes had avoided the literary problems of long martial Homericizing epic by writing lengthy poems of a different kind, the strategy later followed by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*; Vergil chose to solve the difficulty by producing an avowedly military epic ('arma virumque') which in fact spent less than 20 per cent of its space describing battles. The *ennui* produced by over-extended military narrative is thereby excluded, and the combat which is included can therefore be

highlighted by contrast with its surroundings.

These considerations of Homer, and the preceding investigation into Roman tastes and Vergilian 'blood and guts', may seem to suggest that Vergil is simply following the Homeric and Roman tradition of violent military epic, albeit with his own restrictions. This would be misleading, for the success and classic status of the *Aeneid* lies in the multiple strategies which Vergil uses to impart breadth, depth and originality to his fundamentally traditional subject-matter, particularly in the more explicitly military second half of the poem. The relationship with the *Iliad* is not one of straightforward use of material, but a subtle re-working and re-evaluation of a literary classic, as Knauer and others have recently stressed;[13] the relationship with Roman tradition is visible in many ways, but we often find a more philosophical and humane attitude juxtaposed with or even opposed to simple glorification of the Roman state and its military success.

This complex modification of tradition is particularly interesting in the more explicitly military second half of the *Aeneid*, where both Roman and Homeric expectations about military epic, as outlined above, are easily set against other material introduced by the poet. Let us return to the programmatic preface which introduces the poet's description of the war in Italy (7.41–5):

> dicam horrida bella,
> dicam acies actosque animis in funera reges,
> Tyrrhenamque manum totamque sub arma coactam
> Hesperiam. maior rerum mihi nascitur ordo,
> maius opus moveo.

Two important and interconnected attitudes to the forthcoming war seem to emerge from this passage: first, that this particular war is tragic, and second, that it is a civil war between future partners in Italy. I shall take the tragic element first, for it has high prominence in the text.[14] Tragedy is here suggested by 'horrida bella' and 'actosque animis in funera reges'. These battles are terrible and will inspire the tragic emotion of fear, and their narrative will include royal personages driven by grand passions to death, reminiscent of the high emotions and spectacular falls experienced by the usually royal heroes and heroines of Greek tragedy. Many have claimed with some justice that Homer's *Iliad*

is pervaded by a tragic spirit,[15] but what we see here in the *Aeneid* is a new departure from Homer, and indeed from the Roman tradition, a conscious cross-reference in epic to the features of tragedy as a literary genre. Such 'crossing of the genres' is a feature of a sophisticated age, and of Augustan Latin poetry in particular.[16] The aspect of civil war is less explicit here than later on in the poem, but nevertheless seems present in 'totamque sub arma coactam / Hesperiam': all Italy is going to be under arms, but not all on the same side.

One character evidently tinged with tragedy is Turnus, though he is also seen re-playing several roles from the *Iliad* (announced as a second Achilles by the Sibyl in Book 6 but turning out in Book 12 to be a second Hector). He seems to meet the criteria of Aristotle's *Poetics* for the tragic hero or heroine: he or she must fall from a position of high repute, great fortune and splendid family, yet be neither extraordinarily virtuous or wicked and come to grief not through vice but 'because of some piece of ignorance' (a translation of the notorious phrase δι' ἁμαρτίαν τινά[17]). Turnus is first introduced to the reader at the beginning of Book 7 as the first amongst Lavinia's Italian suitors (7.55–6):

> petit ante alios pulcherrimus omnis
> Turnus, avis atavisque potens.
>
> She was sought by Turnus, handsome above all the others, mighty in his forebears.

Here Turnus is given the kind of social stature appropriate not only to an epic hero but also to a tragic one. The description also suggests tragedy in a more general sense, for his heroic beauty, in which he matches Aeneas, is of course to be destroyed in death at the end of the poem.

Many Vergilian scholars have claimed that Turnus has no right to consideration as a tragic hero, since he commits at least two wholly reprehensible acts, neither of which can be justified as proceeding from a mistake: his share in initiating the impious war in Italy, and his killing of Pallas in the course of it.[18] However, both these can be seen as analogous to tragic ignorance. Turnus' share in the cause of the war is at least partly down to the gods: the daemonic Allecto is sent by Juno to stir him to action, and her force is clearly described as irresistible by the

crucial simile Vergil uses: Turnus, initially reasonably cool when he hears of the Trojan arrival and even of the promise of his own expected bride Lavinia to the newcomer Aeneas (7.435–444), is metamorphosed by the torch Allecto is said to thrust into his breast to resemble a cauldron boiling over under the force of heat (462–6).[19] Though Allecto is cunningly working on Turnus' natural tendency to over-excitement, one cannot feel that Turnus is wholly responsible for his subsequent actions in raising Italy against Aeneas. The motif of infuriation to fatal action by a daemonic agent of Juno clearly owes much to the figure of Lyssa, sent by Hera in Euripides' *Heracles* to madden Heracles into slaying the very children whom he has just rescued.[20] We do not blame Heracles there, and there seems little more reason for blaming Turnus in the *Aeneid*. *As* in Euripides, the gods cause the downfall of men for their own reasons: Juno knows that resistance in Italy is ultimately hopeless, but persists in her destructive enterprise all the same (7.313–6).

Turnus' killing of Pallas, the event which effectively seals his own death at the hand of Aeneas in the final lines of the poem, can also be seen in a tragic light. There is no doubt that Turnus behaves reprehensibly here, but there is a tragic sense that 'he knows not what he does'; it is not so much the killing of Pallas, perfectly permissible in war, but its over-confident and even brutal manner, symptom of Turnus' characteristic impetuosity, which takes him to the point of no return. The taking and wearing of the baldric symbolizes this, for the wearing of spoils by the spoiler is unwise and generally fatal elsewhere in the *Aeneid*,[21] and it is at the point of the despoiling and not at that of killing that the poet makes significant comment (10.501–5):

> nescia mens hominum fati sortisque futurae
> et servare modum rebus sublata secundis!
> Turno tempus erit magno cum optaverit emptum
> intactum Pallanta, et cum spolia ista diemque
> oderit.

> Ignorant is the mind of men of destiny and his future lot, and of how to preserve the mean when uplifted by success! There will be a time for Turnus when he will wish to buy Pallas' safety at a great price, and when he will hate these spoils and the day he got them.

The note of ignorance struck in 'nescia', though it recalls Homer's use of νήπιος, often in the same initial position in the hexameter, of foolhardy or presumptuous characters in the *Iliad*.[22] can be seen as tragic in Aristotelian terms: Turnus' error is his excessive glee at Pallas' death, signified in the act of displaying his spoils, and he is ignorant of the proper way to behave in such circumstances. The character of the poet's entrance into his narrative also suggests a tragic link; the gnomic pose of the poet's generalization about the lot of men, a type of remark unfamiliar in Homer, resembles the generalized comment of a tragic chorus on the action unfolding before it, and there are other cases where interventions by the poet in the *Aeneid* seem to owe more to the chorus of tragedy than to the foreshadowing apostrophes of Homer.[23]

Another tragic character, though naturally not directly involved in the fighting, is Amata, queen of Latinus.[24] Like Turnus, she begins as royal and reputable, and ends by falling to the misery of death, in her case the ultimately miserable death of suicide. Like Turnus she is involved in beginning the war through the daemonic agency of Allecto; like Turnus, she furnishes likely material for persuasion to folly, but it is hard to ascribe to her complete responsibility for what she does. Again a pointed simile indicates that she is out of her own control and in the hand of another; when Allecto attacks her she is compared with a top driven along by boys at play[25]—the implication is clearly that Allecto is driving her mad in her own malicious glee, and both situation and image remind us of Gloucester's words in *King Lear* (Act IV Scene 1): 'As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport'. Like Turnus again, she can recall Homeric characters, in her case Andromache and Hecuba, but her suicide bears all the marks of that of a stage-queen of tragedy: she retreats inside the palace and kills herself by hanging, like the Jocasta of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* or the Phaedra of Euripides' *Hippolytus*.

Amata and Turnus are the most significant uses of tragedy in the *Aeneid*, though there are others, especially the use of stage laments by fathers over the corpses of their sons in the grief of Mezentius over Lausus in Book 10 (846–56).[26] Tragedy is only one element in Vergil's use of the crossing of genres in his military epic: elements also appear (for example) from historiography and pastoral,[27] and the strong antiquarian flavour evident throughout the poem may owe as much to contemporary Roman literature of this kind (especially Varro) as to the tra-

dition of aetiology and religious lore inherited from the Hellenistic poets.[28] Such breadth of generic cross-reference is naturally enough not a feature of Homer, for few, if any, other literary genres existed at the time when the Homeric poems were composed; nor is it traditionally Roman, for few poets writing in Latin before Vergil could offer his combination of literary learning and sophisticated techniques of allusion, least of all in the kind of rumbustious military epic for which Ennius had been the model.

Let us return now to the theme of civil war, briefly suggested some while back as a novel element introduced by Vergil to the military epic. On the surface, the war described in the *Aeneid*, being between Trojans and Italians in Italy, is a clash of Western natives and Eastern foreigners, a cultural contrast sometimes played upon in the poem,[29] but one underlying factor effectively characterises it as a civil struggle, namely the future unity of Trojans and Italians in the Roman race. Ironically enough, the surface cause of the war in the dispute about Lavinia's marriage also indicates its ultimate futility: Lavinia must be given to Aeneas and not to Turnus, and it is the descendants of the union of Italian princess and Trojan king who will form the Roman master-race of the future, the inevitability of which is frequently anticipated in the poem and of course proved by history to Vergil's original readers in contemporary Rome. The dual themes of future unity and civil war are hinted at several times in Book 7, but begin to emerge strongly as the war approaches its climax in Book 12. At 12.503–4 the poet expostulates as the battle rages:

> tanton placuit concurrere motu,
> Iuppiter, aeterna gentis in pace futuras ?

> Was it your will, Jupiter, that peoples destined to be in peaceful union for evermore should clash with such mighty motion?

Here 'pax' means more than a cessation of hostilities; as often[30] its etymological connection with 'pact' is stressed—Trojans and Latins have earlier in the book sworn an agreement of what is effectively perpetual union if Aeneas wins the duel with Turnus (175–211), and although the duel-treaty has since been broken by the Latins the deal between Aeneas and Latinus, both carefully described as taking no part in the treaty-

breaking (285–6, 311–17), presumably still stands. The poet thus expresses rhetorical shock, as well he might, at apparent divine sanctioning of a civil war.

The most interesting aspect of Vergil's choice to depict the war in Italy as a civil struggle is its effect on the evaluative framework of his epic. In a war between Romans and foreigners, the standard material of Roman military epic, there is little doubt which side is right and deserves the reader's support; but in a civil war, especially a civil war which begins as in the *Aeneid* by divine machination, the question of which side is justified is, along with the connected issue of responsibility for the war, much more obscure. The poet deliberately complicates the issue, wholly against Roman notions of the just war, which required a clear injury and requests for reparation before war could be declared;[31] he is not interested in clear answers. This is part of what emerges from his poems as a complex view of life and of human fraiity, but it also gives him an important poetic weapon, shared in fact with Homer in the *Iliad*: he is able to show sympathy to characters on either side, especially to Aeneas' arch-enemy Turnus, and to suggest that neither the Trojans nor Italians are perfect. This is seen most significantly in the hero of the poem: Aeneas is generally laudable, but behaves dubiously at crucial points of the battle, losing all restraint in a massacre after the death of Pallas and finally killing Turnus, albeit on a laudable impulse, when clemency would have been easy and appropriate.

Another aspect which Vergil can add to his epic by using the motif of civil war is that of a comparison with his own times. Vergil, born in 70 BC, passed the years of his prime in the terrible period of civil wars which brought an end to the Roman Republic: he was about twenty when Caesar crossed the Rubicon, and nearly forty when Octavian put effective end to the civil wars at Actium. Concern with the civil wars can be seen in the *Georgics*, especially in the climactic end of the first *Georgic* which represents the young Octavian as sole saviour of the state, and the *Aeneid* continues this trend. A civil war in which the figurehead leader of one side, Latinus, is the prospective father-in-law of the leader of the other, Aeneas, must have recalled to contemporary readers the struggle between Caesar and his son-in-law Pompey which had finished at Pharsalus less than thirty years before the appearance of the *Aeneid*; as if to make sure of this, the poet gives a clear signal in his text. As she intervenes to begin the war in Book 7, Juno reflects maliciously that she

knows that the union of the two peoples in a new kingdom is inevitable, but that she will nevertheless raise death and destruction amongst them, ending with the words (7.317) 'hac gener atque socer coeant mercede suorum', 'let this be the cost to their peoples at which the son-in-law and father-in-law unite.' It is not only the general notion which suggests the struggle between Caesar and Pompey, but also the phrase 'socer atque gener': these two labels are used by Vergil himself to describe Caesar and Pompey without naming them in the Show of Heroes in *Aeneid* 6 (850–1), and a satiric passage of Catullus (29.24 'socer generque, perdidistis omnia', father-in-law and son-in-law—you've ruined everything') shows that 'socer generque' was a slogan characterizing the two as early as the mid-fifties BC.

However, for Romans of the teens BC, Vergil's original readership, the most significant figure of the civil wars was not of course Caesar or Pompey, but rather their *princeps* Augustus. Augustus is brought on twice in the first half of the *Aeneid*, but also appears once in its second and military half. The appearance of a contemporary character in a mythological epic is another innovation of Vergil's which broadens the scope of military epic; we may see its effect in *Aeneid* 8, where Augustus' victory at Actium is prophetically depicted on the shield which Aeneas is about to take into the battle which will resolve his own civil war, one of a number of occasions where analogies between Augustus and Aeneas are suggested.[32] Augustus' appearance might be said to unite the traditions of Roman and Homeric military epic: he appears in a mythological epic of Homeric type, but his praises are sung as a military figure, the victor of Actium, just as Ennius sang those of Scipio, victor of Zama. The technique of introducing a contemporary monarch through prophecy of the future in a mythological poem may have been learnt by Vergil from Callimachus' fourth Hymn (to Delos) where Apollo, still in his mothers womb, foretells the coming glories of Ptolemy II (165 ff), but it is certainly new to military epic.

How then are we to see Vergil as a war-poet? I have endeavoured to judge him against his social and historical background, and against the two literary traditions of military epic, Greek and Roman, which influenced him. He has clearly extended the bounds of military epic, not only by using non-epic material but also by treating his war as a civil struggle with no easy jingoistic answers; but he has remained true to both the Roman and Homeric traditions in his depiction of the details of fighting,

and is a true Roman in his glorification of the state and its great men. Thus the impression with which one leaves the second half of the *Aeneid* is one of fundamental ambivalence, an ambivalence reached by modification of the literary tradition of epic and which is matched by an ambivalence in the value-system of the *Aeneid*. The war in Italy, like Aeneas' mission in general, is seen as ultimatety glorious for the future collectivity of Rome, but costly in terms of life and moral integrity for those individuals, both victors and victims, who bear its present cost. This paradox is well illustrated by the final scene of the poem, where Aeneas, to whom the now wounded and defenceless Turnus has yielded the hand of Lavinia, remembers the death of Pallas, whose baldric Turnus is unfortunately wearing, and kills Turnus in vengeance. There on the one hand Turnus loses his life at Aeneas' hands, and Aeneas his philosophic humanity and Roman *clementia* in a cold act of revenge; on the other the act of Aeneas is justified by a laudable loyalty to Pallas and Evander, Turnus' death had been anticipated earlier in the poem and seems inevitable given the close analogy with that of Hector in the *Iliad*; and the killing is perhaps necessary for the final establishment of the Trojans in Italy—the impetuous and humiliated Turnus, despite his professions, might not perhaps have been relied on to keep the peace after defeat and surrender. The sudden cut-off at the very moment of Turnus' death leaves all in the balance: this is no indication that the poem is unfinished, but rather the choice of the poet to sign off at a disturbing and ambiguous moment in order to reinforce the ultimate ambivalence of his outlook on the war. To return to our original analogy with poets of war in English, Vergil may be fruitfully compared as a war-poet with both Rupert Brooke and Wilfred Owen, but perhaps inclines more to the outlook of the latter; his 'Brookean' enthusiasm for Rome and Augustus against the foreign foe, though an important part of the overall plan of the *Aeneid*, plays little real part in the narrative of the war in Italy because of its deliberately-chosen analogy with the Roman civil wars, and what emerges from Vergil's battle-narrative is something more like Owen's sense of the waste of war, of the common and vulnerable humanity of friend and foe, and of the sympathetic role of the war-poet in expressing 'the pity war distilled'.

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NOTES

1. Vergil himself uses a number of gladiatorial terms and images—cf. P.R. Hardie, *Vergil's Aeneid: Cosmos and Imperium*, Oxford, 1986, p.152 n.80.
2. Cf. Vergil *Ecl.* 6.3, Horace *A.P.* 73.
3. Cf. S. Koster, *Antike Epostheorien* (*Palingenesia* 5), Wiesbaden, 1970.
4. Cf. Cicero *Arch.* 21, *Att.* 1.16.15.
5. *FPL* fr. 15–16 Büchner. It is unclear whether this epic Furius can be identified with the Furius Bibaculus—cf. Niall Rudd, *The Satires of Horace*, Cambridge, 1966, p. 298 n. 52, R.O.A.M. Lyne, *CQ* n.s. 28 (1978) p. 171 n. 13.
6. *FPL* fr. 23–4 Büchner.
7. Only one fragment remains (*FPL* fr. 5 Büchner, a fulsome address to Augustus), but a military flavour seems likely from hints in Horace (Odes 1.6.1 ff. and *Sat.* 1.10.43 ff.); cf. W. Wimmel, *ANRW* II 30.3 (1983) 1605–14.
8. Cf. Quintilian 10.1.89; on the uncertainty about the exact title and type of Severus' poem cf. J.C. Bramble in the *Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, II, Cambridge, 1982, 487–8.
9. Cf. *Aeneid* 10.202–3 with the remarks of R.E.A. Palmer, *The Archaic Community of the Romans*, Cambridge, 1970, 39–40.
10. Cassius Dio 41.36.3
11. R. Heinze, *Vergils epische Technik* (2nd ed.), Leipzig, 1915, 207. Heinze's suggestion that Vergil generally avoids complicated wounds for the sake of epic dignity must at least be qualified by the examples offered here.
12. J. Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death*, Oxford, 1980, 103–43, B. Fenik, *Typical Battle Scenes in the Iliad* (Hermes Einzeischriften 21), Wiesbaden, 1968.
13. Cf. G.N. Knauer, *Die Aeneis und Homer* (*Hypomnemata* 7), Göttingen, 1964, and more recently A. Barchiesi, *La traccia del modello* (*Biblioteca di MD*, 1), Pisa, 1984.
14. On tragedy in the *Aeneid* cf. (e.g.) N.W. De Witt, *CJ* 26 (1930) 19–27, K. Quinn, *Virgil's Aeneid: A Critical Description*, London, 1968, 324–49, and (most substantially) A. König, *Die Aeneis und die griechische Tragödie*, Diss. Berlin, 1970.
15. Cf. R.B. Rutherford, *JHS* 102 (1982) 145–60, C.W. Macleod,

Homer: Iliad Book XXIV, Cambridge, 1982, 1–8.

16. Cf. W. Kroll, *Studien zum Verständnis der römischen Literatur*, Stuttgart, 1924, 202–24.

17. On the meaning of this disputed phrase see most helpfully D.W. Lucas, *Aristotle's Poetics*, Oxford, 1968, Appendix IV (different views e.g. in T.C.W. Stinton, *CQ* n.s. 25 (1975) 221–54, S. Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, London, 1986, 215–26). For an assessment of the characters of the *Aeneid* as tragic by Aristotelian standards cf. M. von Albrecht in *Silvae: Festschrift für E. Zinn*, ed. von Albrecht and E. Heck, Tübingen, 1970, 1–5.

18. This view is put most substantially and recently by P. Schenk, *Die Gestalt des Turnus in Vergilis Aeneis* (Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie 164), Königstein, 1984.

19. Cf. D.A. West, op. cit. (n. 1) 68–9, S.J. Harrison, *PLLS* 5 (1985) 100.

20. Cf. R. Heinze, op. cit. (n. 12) 183–4.

21. Cf. Heinze 209–10, R.A. Hornsby, *PhQ* 45 (1966) 347 ff.

22. Cf. *Iliad* 2.38, 5.406, 12.113, 20.264, 296, 466 (all in initial position), and Kirk's note on *Iliad* 2.38.

23. Cf. N.W. De Witt, *CJ* 2 (1907) 286–7

24. Cf. A. La Penna, *Maia* 19 (1967) 309–18.

25. The top probably recalls Dionysus' aspect as child-god, anticipating the Bacchic guise which Amata will soon assume—cf. G. Hirst, *CQ* 31 (1937) 65–6.

26. Cf. G. Thome, *Gestalt und Funktion des Mezentius bei Vergil*, Frankfurt, 1979, 136–7.

27. Historiography: *Aeneid* 1.8, 7.40, 10.90 (interest in *causae*—cf. E. Fraenkel, *Kleine Beiträge*, Rome, 1964, 2.149). Pastoral: cf. the scenes at 10.190–1 and 10.833–6.

28. Cf. N.M. Horsfall, *Antichthon* 15 (1981) 141–50.

29. Cf. esp. the speech of Numanus Remulus (*Aeneid* 9.598–620).

30. Cf. S. Weinstock, *JRS* 50 (1960) p. 45 n. 12.

31. Cf. Cicero *Off.* 1.35–40, S. Albert, *Bellum Iustum* (Frankfurter althistorischer Studien 10), Kallmünz, 1980.

32. On the Aeneas/Augustus analogy see most fully G. Binder, *Aeneas und Augustus*, Meisenheim-am-Glan, 1971.