

# Review

**Nicholas Horsfall: Virgil, *Aeneid* 7, a Commentary.  
Leiden: Brill, *Mnemosyne Supplementum* 198, 2000.  
xliv + 567 pp. ISBN 90 04 10842 4**

To attempt even a short critique of this mighty work has proved exceedingly daunting. I have had to remind myself repeatedly that this is not a contribution to *Gnomon*, nor yet a report on a doctoral dissertation, such as indeed was the origin of Horsfall's commentary.

My excellent father, to whom, like the poet Horace, I feel a great debt, was a devoted pupil of the eminent literary critic Sir Herbert Grierson; he used to warn me against 'peering scholarship', by which he meant, I think, unilluminated/-ing pedantry, and it was a salutary warning. No doubt Eduard Fraenkel's observation about the frequent disproportion between learning and judgement which he found in his juniors says something not wholly dissimilar. One is therefore on one's guard.

I must declare at the outset my unbounded respect and personal regard for the author, a splendid maverick in his generation, whose scholarly career has embraced Cambridge, Oxford, UCL and Rome. This descendant, as I have been told, of the towering philosopher-critic, Moses Mendelssohn, known as 'the German Socrates', was Fraenkel's bibliographer; his *prolegomena* and subsequent allusions in the present volume bespeak close personal communication, sometimes '*per litt.*', with the best and the greatest in recent Latin scholarship. Such is the stratosphere which he inhabits, one of truly European amplitude, that any reservations which one may express about his work must seem wretchedly Telchianian, the cackling of geese against swans.

The ready availability of Mynors' and Geymonat's texts means that a conventional *apparatus criticus* could be dispensed with, but careful attention is paid to Orthography, Punctuation (a new paragraph at 58 ??) and Text in the notes. We are offered a translation, intended for clarification, which might fairly be described as workaday; apart from one or two oddities like 'hoggets' = *bidentis* (93) and 'merlons' = *pinnis* (159), it does not, in the words of our emerita president, 'make Virgil strange'. At 441 Turnus addresses Allecto/Calybe as 'reverend mother' (lower case)! H's tenses are inconsistent, but then so, I suppose, are Virgil's, if in a different way.

The commentary itself has, it must be said, certain idiosyncratic features of presentation which can render it opaque to the simple-minded reader: here telegraphic or enigmatic brevity (TCD not a great seat of learning in Ireland but the commentator *Donatus*(2)), there a seemingly endless nexus of parentheses. Overall the work is enormously long, self-avowedly ‘thorough’; at a guess it is a good two-and-a-half times as long as the densest Austin commentary. A colleague has described it to me as ‘encyclopaedic’; perhaps that is why it is not notably enjoyable to read *in extenso*. The learning is quite prodigious: that goes without saying. Lexicographical information is given in profusion: *sexies* in this poet, *octies* in that. But very often neither these statistics nor the immense bibliographical litanies are suggestively enucleated: encyclopaedic is a good term for this, and it may be what is required of a commentary in an epoch when scholarly tools, we are told, are available of which Austin and Fordyce knew nothing.

And yet, may I wistfully record how much I hanker after the warmth, the grace and the modesty of an Austin commentary. Proud as I am to have been RGA’s apprentice in the 60’s, I can now set down the indignation I felt inwardly when a senior classicist kindly explained to me that Austin was ‘not really a scholar of the first rank’ - this in response to my attempt to spearhead a commemoration of his 70th birthday in 1971. The wonderful address given to the Society by John Henderson in May 2004 has changed all that, debunking as it did the rather patronising way Austin was at times treated by the establishment, and revealing his dignified refusal to revise his *Aen.*4. Austin wrote, ‘One reason I am against a complete overhaul is perhaps an odd one. The book as it stands was to a great extent the product of emotion...’ This in a nutshell is what made - and makes - Austin such a sympathetic Virgilian.

But back to Horsfall’s achievement: *maius opus moveo* (45). No-one could claim a greater mastery of Italian topography, geography, mythography, ritual or *archaeologia* (variously spelt) than H. Such are the *desiderata* of the task which he fulfils to admiration; *à propos* he is rather addicted to the note of admiration, vulgarly known as the exclamation mark: I counted four in one two-page spread. Sometimes the joke is rather lost on one.

I believe that it has been observed that Housman’s critical notes on Lucan are even harder to fathom than the text itself. One might say this of H.’s note on *vitisator* (179), with multiple brackets and parentheses. I was initially utterly bemused until, by a judicious series of deletions, I was left with ‘The correct explanation ... seems to be that the *falx*... is a common attribute of agricultural deities.’ (Is this so surprising ?) Rather as in a GCSE mathematics paper, where candidates are enjoined to show all working, this takes up 25 lines of commentary including Latin quoted from I am d....d if I can make out whom, but which confusingly incorporates a Horsfallian [*vix!*] in the same italic type as the main quotation, some Greek, and, finally, a word accidentally omitted ‘[of] the wine’, followed by another screamer.

H. can bring to bear a rigour on a par with that of the great Latin grammarians of our age, such as Watt or Fordyce, however much stick the latter worthy takes *obiter*. So let me turn to that most interesting and poignant passage about Latinus’s having no surviving male issue :

*filius huic fato divum prolesque virilis  
nulla fuit, primaque oriens erepta iuventa est.* (50f.)

Why does H. start his explication with the particular idiom ‘*nullus sum*’ (‘not exclusively comic’ - no indeed: Plaut.*Cas.*621 is in a context identified by Vahlen as paratragic)? This is *nihil ad*

*rem*, because in it the verb is *copulative*, whereas at 7.50f. the verb is surely existential, with *huic* denoting the possessor. (I wonder that commentators have not picked up on the tense of *fuisset*. Can it be because they assume that it stands *metri gratia for erat*?) Latinus had a son once, but he has one no more because he has been snatched away, a true perfect.

Central to this short review is an assertion of the excellence that lies at the heart of the whole concept. On line 4 we read ‘His Circe is exotic and fascinating, at a distance, but altogether sinister and dangerous (contrast Hom. ...).’ What follows lacks this patrician luminosity, and yet this has to be taken in good part as essential to his prerequisite of ‘thoroughness’. Time and time again he makes marvellous comments on the exact sense and colour of words in Virgil: on 36 *laetus* ‘an adj. of fundamental thematic importance’. Its appearance in the very first line of *G.* is surely profoundly significant. Fruitfulness or joyfulness, which is primary? *OLD* does not decide. The word comes to denote a reaction to how life can be when things go aright; according to nature, as it were.

The cackling goose had to report a good two dozen typographical and similar errors in the first half of the work. After that the critical faculty was shamed into being engrossed in higher issues. Of the two dozen the majority are obvious or ‘quotidian’. Is it *proemium* or *prooemium*? In S.Dan. on 51 read *Aenege* not *Aeneas*. On 274 for *eligo* 15x read *deligo*, else the note is self-contradictory. Hereabouts too the Greek accents gang oddly agley. On 319 the quotation from 6.93f. omits the probative word *coniunx*. RGA would have arrogated himself a decade in Purgatory for countenancing ‘accomodate’ (*sic*) on 45-57.

*Sed anser iam taceo, ne improbus (G.1.199) fiam.* Virgilian studies are colossally in Dr Horsfall’s debt. Who will now review his 11 for *PVS* 26? In the words of Sixtus Beckmesser, ‘*Fanget an*’!

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