4-28-2016

Not the Best Part, but Something Else: Virgil, Augustine, and the Platonist Perils of Poetry

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At several critical junctures, both Virgil’s Aeneid and Book One of Augustine’s Confessions invoke an ancient critique of representational art. The poet – composing a nationalist epic – as well as the theologian – recounting his reaction to the poem some four hundred years later – draw upon a discourse inaugurated by Plato in the fourth century B.C.E. The various concerns leveled at poetry in the Republic – most importantly its lack of truth-value and engendering of destructive emotion – resurface in telling ways throughout the epic and autobiography alike. When Virgil expresses a painful awareness of the limits of his craft, or gestures towards its potentially destructive emotional effects, he registers self-doubts that will be magnified in Augustine’s condemnation. In both the implicit self-questioning and the explicit rebuke, Plato’s critique is powerfully put into effect.

A primary item of Platonist critique, operative in both Virgil and Augustine’s works, is the familiar accusation of falsehood: “An image-maker, a representer, understands only appearance, while reality is beyond him... So... we’d be perfectly justified in taking hold of him and placing him in the same category as a painter.”¹ In such an idealist framework, the work of the painter or poet is inherently severed from truth; inevitably, the picture or poem remains a counterfeit of reality. Moreover, beyond this preoccupation with truth-

value is a fear of the emotional reactions provoked by the mimetic picture or poem: “and a further point of resemblance is that the part of the mind he communicates with is not the best part, but something else... he destroys the rational part by feeding and fattening up this other part, and this is equivalent to someone destroying the more civilized members of a community by presenting ruffians with political power.” The work of the tragic poet, just like that of the painter, “irrigates and tends to these things when they should be left to wither, and it makes them our rulers when they should be our subjects...”² Poetry, which Plato sees as intrinsically mendacious and productive of passion and irrationality, assumes a multidimensional threat – one that will be portrayed in consequential ways by Virgil and Augustine.

As early as Book One of the Aeneid, the Platonist critique of poetry is brought to the fore. After arriving in Carthage, Aeneas takes a tour of the temple Dido had dedicated to Juno. After the shaken hero exclaims to his friend that “Troy’s renown will yet be your salvation”³ Virgil offers a striking portrayal of his reaction: “And he fed his soul on empty pictures / Sighing, weeping, his face a flood of tears / As he scanned the murals of the Trojan War.”⁴ The Latin inani (empty or vain) carries no positive connotation whatsoever; rather, it stresses the mural’s troublesome hollowness, its necessary severance from reality. When one considers the shared limits of poetic and visual representation – something we have already seen outlined in the Republic – this critique of the artwork would seem to gesture towards something larger. Indeed, it serves as an interrogation of nothing less than Virgil’s entire poetic project: questioning his own role as a chronicler of Aeneas’ journey, the poet fears his likeness to Plato’s “image-maker,” the “representer” who “understands only appearance, while reality is beyond him.” At this somber moment, Virgil registers a real ambivalence about the purpose of art, painfully questioning its utility. Using the Carthaginian mural as a stand-in for the Aeneid itself, the poet confronts


the possibility that his poetic effort is a fundamentally futile and fraudulent one.

In addition to examining the deceptive nature of mimesis (literary or artistic imitation), Virgil – through the character of Dido – examines the further Platonist claim that poetic representations incite destructive emotions. Indeed, the Carthaginian Queen is led to her destruction partly by means of her lover’s storytelling: her powerful affective response, after hearing Aeneas’ story, only serves to embolden her ultimately fatal passion. Plato, we must recall, famously remarked that the poet/painter works by “gratifying” the “irrational side” of their reader/viewer, facilitating a dangerous emotional instability.⁵ With this in mind, Aeneas’ account of his people’s suffering – a narrative that enthralls Dido – further inflames

⁵ Plat. Rep., 70, 75.
the irrationality of which the philosopher speaks. Accelerating the Queen’s descent into madness is the emotional impact of her lover’s representation. In awe of “What the Fates have put him through at sea, / The wars he painted, fought to the bitter end…” Dido is plunged into a state of intense desire. Recalling Plato’s accusation that the poet “gratifies… an aspect which hungers after tears and the satisfaction of having cried until one can cry no more,” the Queen yearns to hear again the account of her beloved’s suffering: “Mad to hear once more the labors of Ilium, / She demands the story again, and again she hangs / on every word.” As illustrated by Plato’s language, Dido remains hungry to hear of Trojan hardship, enraptured by an account of death and woe. Aeneas’s narrative, as it becomes clear, exerts a powerful control over his lover as she is drawn in, rendered obsessive, and provoked to emotional excess. As the book comes to its deadly close, Dido (the loser) serves as a cautionary counterpoint to Aeneas (the winner): her passion is the tragic inversion of the hero’s stoic resolve. Abandoned by her lover, the Queen ends up losing everything; poetry, and its dominantly emotional impact, is partly to blame.

Written some four hundred years after the Aeneid, and eight hundred after the Republic, the first book of Augustine’s Confessions draws on the same critiques of mimesis. In the opening section of his spiritual autobiography, in which he describes his childhood reaction to Virgil’s epic, the theologian invokes the familiar Platonist concerns. Just as Virgil did in the scene of the Carthaginian temple, Augustine adopts the emphasis on art’s fraudulence and insubstantiality. The epic, over the course of his account, is described as “vain,” “false,” an “empty fable.” We are not far here, then, from either the ontologically inferior “appearances” of Plato’s Republic or the pictura inani of Juno’s temple. Poetry – appearance rather than...
reality, shadow rather than substance – is in all these cases predetermined as an empty, diminished thing.

Even more crucial to Augustine than the claims of poetry’s insubstantiality is the fear of its emotional impact. Plato’s concern that mimetic art “communicates” not with “the best part of the mind” but “something else” here finds another powerful expression.¹⁰ In a famous passage, Augustine writes, “… I was later forced to learn about the wanderings… of Aeneas… and to weep over the death of a Dido who took her own life from love. In reading this, O God my life, I myself was meanwhile dying by my alienation from you, and my miserable condition in that respect brought no tear to my eyes.”¹¹ As his account indicates, the pathos of Dido’s death is so overwhelming as to cause the suppression of spiritual concerns. Weeping over her fate, Augustine finds a perverted kind of pleasure in his reaction: “Had I been forbidden to read this story, I would have been sad that I could not read what made me sad.”¹² Such a sentiment recalls the irrational desire of Plato’s playgoer who “hungered after tears and the satisfaction of having cried until one can cry no more.”¹³ Indeed, the queen is acting upon that part of his mind that “urges us to remember the bad times and to express our grief, and which is insatiably greedy for tears.”¹⁴ Operative in the experiences of the Athenian spectator, Dido, and her fourth century sympathizer alike is the desire to hear a tale of loss and pain: a tragic play, the Trojan’s defeat, the suicide of an abandoned lover. Losing self-control, replacing
reason with passion, they fall prey to poetry’s emotional manipulation.

With different intentions and in different degrees, both the author of the *Aeneid* and his most prominent fourth-century reader invoke the Platonist critique of mimesis. A fear of poetry’s fraudulence and its irrational emotional effects—built into the epic as fleeting moments of self-doubt—are made more explicit in Augustine’s account; what serve as brief questionings in Virgil’s work are given full expression in the saint’s harsh censure. The threat of poetry’s inherent “emptiness,” as well as its natural “irrigation” of those things which “reason” should suppress, arguably falls away in the *Aeneid* as the romance section makes way for “a higher order of things... a greater work”¹⁵: the teleological, epic conclusion. The famous “pictures” in this second half, the images on Vulcan’s shield, are prophetically true rather than false and empty, producing awe and wonder rather than “over-indulgent” grief.

However, as Augustine’s account of the *Aeneid* demonstrates—as does the experience of countless other schoolboys, writers, and composers from Henry Purcell to Hector Berlioz—Virgil could not suppress such “over-indulgence.” After all, it is the tragic pathos of Dido that has most powerfully aroused affective response. When later readers, medieval and renaissance schoolboys, and Baroque operagoers encounter the character, Plato’s greatest fears are all too often realized; Dido’s fate kindles that part of their minds that for the philosopher must urgently be suppressed. Weeping for a poetic fiction, they are ruled by passion rather than reason, “regressive” self-pity rather than “productive” confidence, “not the best part, but something else.”

¹⁵ Verg. A., 6.52-53.