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## Which "Aeneid" in Whose Nineties?

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## Which "Aeneid" in Whose Nineties?

### **Abstract**

I suppose that I ought to feel well-prepared to speak about the future of studies on the *Aeneid*, having just read and reviewed two new books dealing with the theme of prophecy in that poem. In reality, though, I feel utterly unable to make comfortable predictions about where our epic voyages will take us—particularly as one of the books I alluded to, Professor O'Hara's, sees prophecy in the *Aeneid* as not only misleading, but usually fatal. I will speak, therefore, in not a vatic but a protreptic mode, focusing less on what I think will happen in *Aeneid* research, than on what I would like to see happen.

### **Disciplines**

Arts and Humanities | Classics

## WHICH *AENEID* IN WHOSE NINETIES?

I suppose that I ought to feel well-prepared to speak about the future of studies on the *Aeneid*, having just read and reviewed two new books dealing with the theme of prophecy in that poem.<sup>1</sup> In reality, though, I feel utterly unable to make comfortable predictions about where our epic voyages will take us—particularly as one of the books I alluded to, Professor O'Hara's, sees prophecy in the *Aeneid* as not only misleading, but usually fatal. I will speak, therefore, in not a vatic but a protreptic mode, focusing less on what I think will happen in *Aeneid* research, than on what I would like to see happen.

Recent years, of course, have seen many notable contributions to the ongoing discourse that surrounds the *Aeneid*.<sup>2</sup> Some of these show signs of altering significantly the frame of reference within which most of us operate. I take this frame of reference to be more or less that of the so-called Harvard school as modified by Johnson,<sup>3</sup> to wit, a tendency to dwell on the darkness that pervades the epic at the expense of its triumphal, panegyric qualities. Important work in this vein continues and no doubt will continue to be done; but I think most will agree that among the most significant studies of the *Aeneid* to appear in recent years is one that implicitly challenges the usual assumptions of Vergil's more "pessimistic" readers. I refer to Philip Hardie's study of the cosmic allegory in the *Aeneid*.<sup>4</sup> Hardie of course emphasizes the triumphal and panegyric aspects of the epic in a way that has not been reconciled with what I have called the prevailing critical attitude; and he is not alone in doing so. Francis Cairns has weighed in with a study of the poem from the perspective of ancient kingship theory, finding Vergil critical of bad kings such as Dido, Turnus, and Mezentius, but approving of the apprentice king Aeneas and, by extension, of the emperor Augustus.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Karl Galinsky has contributed an important article considering the anger of Aeneas from the perspective of

<sup>1</sup>Elisabeth Henry, *The Vigour of Prophecy. A Study of Virgil's Aeneid* (Carbondale and Edwardsville 1989); James J. O'Hara, *Death and the Optimistic Prophecy in Vergil's Aeneid* (Princeton 1990). See *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 1 (1990) 62–68.

<sup>2</sup>These remarks are not intended as a comprehensive survey of recent scholarship on the *Aeneid*. If I single out a few works in particular, I do so only for illustrative purposes, and mean no disrespect to the many other valuable contributions that space prevents me from mentioning.

<sup>3</sup>For the term, see W. R. Johnson, *Darkness Visible. A Study of Virgil's Aeneid* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London 1976) 11, 156–7 n. 10. Johnson's own reading performed the crucial service of moderating the tendency towards extremism in critical pessimism while maintaining a clear emphasis on Vergil's tragic *Weltanschauung*.

<sup>4</sup>*Virgil's Aeneid: Cosmos and Imperium* (Oxford 1986).

<sup>5</sup>*Virgil's Augustan Epic* (Cambridge 1989).

ancient philosophy and rhetoric, concluding that the fury with which the hero dispatches Turnus at the end of the poem, far from being an unfortunate lapse into passionate unreason, is no more than what such theorists as Aristotle and Cicero, along, therefore, with most contemporary readers, would have demanded of him.<sup>6</sup>

None of this, needless to say, is standard “Harvard school” stuff. Disagreement with the leading pessimistic critics there has always been, but these neo-traditionalist ventures mark the end of a chapter in Vergilian studies. For the past twenty or more years, the work of scholars like Michael Putnam and Ralph Johnson has had a tremendous influence on the study of the *Aeneid*, legitimizing what was initially derided as the anachronistic misinterpretation of the New Left, protest movement generation. Now, however, the challenge of Hardie and company has created a new situation, one reminiscent, *mutatis mutandis*, of the early seventies, when readers were confronted by two very different interpretations of the poem, one of them in the process of yielding its position of orthodoxy to the other.

At this point let me state emphatically: I am not heralding the return of Brooks Otis, or advocating that we all learn to read and love the *Aeneid* as a poem of imperial glorification. By instinct and training I am, I confess, a knee-jerk pessimist, and I tend to read the *Aeneid* accordingly. But neither am I suggesting that we bar the gates against the militant marauders reveling in the blood of Turnus and Dido. Instead, I want to complain that returning to a situation like that of twenty years ago hardly constitutes progress—and here I am echoing the remarks of Professors Perkell and Thomas. Anyone surveying the course of Vergilian studies since the sixties would be justified in concluding that the main influences on our scholarship have indeed been the Cold War, Viet Nam, the protest movement, Watergate, and the Reagan-Thatcher “revolution.” One would conclude, in other words, that we Vergilians have continued to ask the same questions in the same ways, and to get answers determined largely by our tendency to react to literature much as we feel about the current political climate of our own world.

I say this not to belittle the very real interpretive achievements of recent decades, but merely to call attention to what I see as an obvious trend. If I were going to try to predict the future, it is clear to me how I should go about it: the nineties would obviously be the decade of critical recession, of hermeneutic *glasnost*, or of Middle East adventurism, with Saddam Hussein taking the role of either Aeneas or Turnus, according to one’s preference. I hope that this caricature does not come to pass. But unless we find a way of changing the rules that

<sup>6</sup>“The Anger of Aeneas,” *AJP* 109 (1988) 321–48.

govern our discourse about the *Aeneid*, I am afraid that something like it actually may.

How can we change the rules? I believe that there are many ways, but that they all have one thing in common: namely, that we change our audience. Our critical discourse has become restricted, in my view, because our audience has. As a rule, we Vergilians address only each other about well-established issues defining a poem that clearly matters to us a great deal. But, as my title suggests, we need to consider more carefully what sort of poem we think the *Aeneid* is, and what audience we wish to engage when we discuss it.

No member of the Vergilian Society, I imagine, will challenge the idea that the *Aeneid* belongs to that small group of texts that by virtue of their artistic excellence and historical importance, define the canon of European literature. And yet, as compared with those who study other canonical texts, we Vergilians seldom behave as if the *Aeneid* really did belong. Indeed, there is a strong tendency for Vergilians to approach the *Aeneid* in a rather provincial way. By this I mean that, even where the opportunity exists to discuss the poem in a way that jibes well with other areas of current intellectual discourse, the opportunities are usually overlooked. This simply does not happen in other disciplines, and the fact that it does happen in Vergilian studies is but another token of the fact that we are shirking our duties and allowing the *Aeneid* to slip out of its berth among the truly classic texts. There is, as there has always been, an ongoing dialogue about the nature of literature, a dialogue that takes place across the boundaries of individual disciplines: the works of Robert Alter, Frank Kermode, and Harold Bloom on biblical narrative;<sup>7</sup> Stephen Greenblatt on Shakespeare;<sup>8</sup> Stanley Fish on *Paradise Lost*;<sup>9</sup> Gérard Genette on Proust;<sup>10</sup> Tzvetan Todorov on the *Decameron*;<sup>11</sup> and many others; all form a part of this never-ending dialogue. In general, this discourse takes the form of innovative commentary on canonical texts; and this is so because Shakespeareans feel that

<sup>7</sup>Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York 1981); *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York 1985); *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, edd. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, MA 1987); *The Book of J*, translated from the Hebrew by David Rosenberg, interpreted by Harold Bloom (New York 1990).

<sup>8</sup>Stephen Jay Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago 1980); *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London 1988).

<sup>9</sup>*Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (London & New York 1967). See also "Interpreting the *Variorum*," *Critical Inquiry* 2 (1975–76) 465–85, and "Interpreting 'Interpreting the *Variorum*,'" *Critical Inquiry* 3 (1976–77) 191–6 (both reprinted as chapters 5 and 6 of *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA 1980) 147–80.

<sup>10</sup>*Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, tr. Jane E. Lewin, foreword by Jonathan Culler (Ithaca 1980). See also *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, tr. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca 1988).

<sup>11</sup>*Grammaire du Décameron* (The Hague 1969).

they have enough of a stake in work on Dostoevsky to stay in touch with new developments in that field—or, to put it better, perhaps, because students of Shakespeare and Dostoevsky take the trouble to address such issues and present them in such a way as to engage scholars in other fields, along with interested non-professionals. But we Vergilians have for some reason failed to develop this laudable habit. Seldom do we ask the questions or develop the arguments that will engage people outside our field, or publish in journals that would put us in touch with a wider audience; nor do we encourage those who are interested to treat the poem as anything more than an important prolegomenon to later literature.<sup>12</sup> As a result, despite the fact that the *Aeneid* has had a historical impact on education and literary taste that is arguably second to no single European poem, there is no study of the *Aeneid* that has had an impact on modern intellectual life and literary discourse anything like that of dozens of books in other fields.

The problem, then, as I have said, is that we have allowed Vergilian studies to become too insular, to develop its own vocabulary and style without bothering to take much note of the critical discourse flowing over so many other texts of comparable importance.

For an illustration of how this happens, let us return to the critical stasis with which we began. There is a long-standing tradition of understanding the ambivalence of the *Aeneid* in terms of conflicting voices. The idea goes back to Adam Parry's seminal 1963 article, "The Two Voices of Virgil's *Aeneid*,"<sup>13</sup> which indeed may be said to have established the dichotomy with which students of the *Aeneid* have been obsessed ever since. The concept of dissonant voices has been invoked many times since then, the most recent avatar being Oliver Lyne's 1987 *Further Voices in Virgil's Aeneid*.<sup>14</sup> Now, I admire this book, and do not mean to single it out for undeserved criticism. But I do think that it is exemplary of how Vergilian studies fail to address themselves to a potentially wide audience. Lyne missed an important opportunity by framing his argument as he did, and most of us are liable to the same sins of omission by virtue of the way we have been conditioned to work. He approaches the *Aeneid* from a great variety of methodological directions, tying all of them together by the trope of

<sup>12</sup>That there is a healthy interest in Vergil among students of later literature is obvious from the recent works of Barbara Bono, *Literary Transvaluation from Vergilian Epic to Shakespearean Tragicomedy* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London 1984); Sarah Spence, *The Rhetorics of Imitation and Desire: Vergil, Augustine, and the Troubadors* (Ithaca & London 1988); Barbara Pavlock, *Eros, Imitation, and the Epic Tradition* (Ithaca & London 1990). Further evidence of this interest will be found in Professor Kallendorf's remarks on Vergil's *Nachleben*.

<sup>13</sup>*Arion* 2 (1963) 66–80.

<sup>14</sup>Oxford 1987. My remarks here should not be taken as undermining what I say about this useful book elsewhere in this issue (see pp. 140–2).

voice, which Parry had brought into Vergilian studies almost twenty-five years previously. One might ask whether nothing had happened in so long a time to require revision or modification of this approach. Here some will object that Lyne's concept of "further voices" is not identical with Parry's "two voices," and I will concede the point. Nonetheless it remains true that Lyne has taken over a term familiar to Vergilians and readily identified with a particular perspective on the *Aeneid* without considering whether anything in the broader context of contemporary literary studies might have enhanced his own argument and made his work both more interesting and more accessible to non-specialists. Again, we all do this; it is how not only Vergilians, but classicists in general tend to operate. I single out Lyne, however, because it is almost incredible to me that, having decided to organize his discussion of the *Aeneid* around the idea that the poem is pervaded by a multiplicity of voices, he somehow managed not to relate this perception to what many have considered the most influential critical idea of the eighties, M. M. Bakhtin's concept of literary and cultural polyphony.<sup>15</sup> Now, in neglecting this idea, Lyne may resemble a friend and colleague of mine who will not utter Bakhtin's name, but instead refers with palpable disdain to "the B-word." I can't help but sympathize somewhat with this attitude. Bakhtin is trendy, and classicists instinctively avoid trendiness, or like to think that we do. We are trained to take the long view, and when we hear of someone like Bakhtin, whose work was virtually unknown only a few years ago, being hailed as one of the greatest figures in twentieth-century thought, we can't help wondering whether he will have faded back into obscurity by the dawn of the twenty-first. This may happen, and the last thing I am advocating is that Vergilians should belatedly make the nineties the decade of Bakhtin. What I am saying is that by in essence ignoring his work in the eighties, Lyne and other students of the *Aeneid* lost an important opportunity to make the interpretation of the *Aeneid* a central part of the now well-established and highly stimulating critical discourse on the nature of literature and culture that cuts across virtually all humanistic and social science disciplines.

<sup>15</sup>This idea is developed chiefly in a group of four works available in English translation under the collective title *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, University of Texas Slavic Series, no. 1 (Austin 1981). See also Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin. The Dialogic Principle*, tr. Wlad. Godzich, Theory and History of Literature, vol. 13 (Minneapolis 1984); Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World* (London & New York 1990). J. K. Newman, in his *The Classical Epic Tradition* (Madison 1986) has made significant use of Bakhtin's concept of carnival, which is explained in his *Problemy Poetiki Dostoevskogo*, 2d ed. (Moscow 1963) = *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, tr. & ed. Caryl Emerson, intr. Wayne C. Booth (Minneapolis 1984), and *Tvorchestvo François Rabelais i Narodnaya Kul'tura Srednevekov'ya i Renessansa* (Moscow 1965) = *Rabelais and his World*, tr. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA 1968; repr. Bloomington 1984). Newman does cite one of the essays that appears in *The Dialogic Imagination*, namely "Epos i Roman," *Voprosy Literatury* 14 (1970) 95–122 = "Epic and Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination*, 3–40, but he does not make very significant use of dialogism, polyphony, and related ideas.

Some will object that I am recommending merely that we stay abreast of the current jargon and gussy up our arguments in the emperor's new clothes, and be always ready to jump on the latest intellectual bandwagon. But I am not. Indeed, one of the more depressing tendencies in Classics nowadays is simply to apply to Greek and Latin texts methods created (often decades earlier) to explain the peculiarities of other literary works, without seriously questioning the suitability of the procedure. A more sensible approach would be to stay abreast of the critically innovative work produced by our colleagues in other fields, but to use it as a stimulus to develop new theoretical frameworks that will address the problems peculiar to our texts. Such an effort will often take the form of modifying existing theories in the light of problems unique to or more apparent in ancient literature, and even of solutions to those problems that we have been able to devise. To return to my previous example, by reformulating Parry's concept of voice in terms of Bakhtin's polyphony, one could not only score points with our trend-setting colleagues in other disciplines, but actually influence the cross-disciplinary discourse about literature while improving the state of critical discussion of the *Aeneid* as well. One of the many peculiarities of Bakhtin's work is that, while most of it was written as much as fifty years ago, little of it was known until the past ten or fifteen years. This means that Bakhtin formulated his ideas on dialogism well before Parry's seminal article, but that his work remained practically unknown until Parry had become a fixture in Vergilian bibliographies. Thus Parry can actually be read as an important "forerunner" of Bakhtin. There is more. Parry developed his idea of the two voices to explain what he saw as a peculiar feature of one particular epic poem, the *Aeneid*. Bakhtin, working half a century before Parry in the intellectually restricted climate of the Stalinist U.S.S.R., spoke from the perspective of a trained classicist, but one who was current with the critical thinking of the late nineteenth century rather than that of his own day. Thus, despite the fearlessly novel qualities of his work as a whole, his pronouncements on certain classical texts appear rather quaint. In particular, he had a very old-fashioned view of epic, which he made the representative par excellence of monologic literature, the antitype of the dialogic genres that interested him most, especially the novel. Vergilians, of course, to say nothing of Homerists, had grown used to a very different view of epic long before Bakhtin's work became generally known. But, instead of entering the cross-disciplinary dialogue on how best to make use of what Bakhtin has to offer, we have failed to engage our colleagues in other disciplines on such important questions as these, where the discourse peculiar to Vergilian studies equips us to play a leading role. At the same time, Bakhtin's extremely plastic notion of dialogism may provide a way of understanding the different voices of the *Aeneid* not as irreconcilable points-of-view that force us



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as readers to choose between them, the model familiar from most *Aeneid* criticism, but as essential ingredients within a single work of art.<sup>16</sup>

To close, I have not intended to identify a method that may serve Vergilians in the nineties as a skeleton key with which to unlock the unsuspected secrets of the *Aeneid*, but have merely focused on one among many possible literary approaches that could help us to restore *Aeneid* criticism to a place of importance in modern critical discourse commensurate with the status of the poem itself. What matters is not so much that we adopt this or that critical approach, but rather that we open ourselves to the stimulation that, I believe, a new audience will inevitably provide.

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<sup>16</sup>I am happy to note that some recent work on Vergil advocates unresolved (i.e. neither optimistic nor pessimistic) readings of both the *Aeneid* (Susan Ford Wiltshire, *Public and Private in Vergil's Aeneid* [Amherst 1989]) and the *Georgics* (Christine Perkell, *The Poet's Truth: A Study of the Poet in Virgil's Georgics* [Berkeley, Los Angeles & London 1989]).

## RESPONSE

It was an astute move of Professor Farrell to avoid the vatic stance. I, though I am much older and by traditional standards closer to the impunity often conceded to prophets, am also sure that I would be wiser to couch my beliefs in modesty. I am not even confident that I have the authority to be protreptic, as Farrell was. Therefore, let me proceed along the dialogic route that the admired Bakhtin, so eloquently invoked by Farrell, perceived as the signal virtue of the novel and the great defect of epic and other grand genres of the past.

The age that we are entering is radically different from the Gay Nineties of a century ago. Now, we would have ambivalence about that adjective, which has ceased to denote happiness. Similarly, we would have trouble with some of the public assumptions of the Left and the more recent and present Right, that bear upon the roles and characters of political leaders, the demands made upon ordinary people by the questionable claims of national emergency, and above all on the utility or futility of war as national policy. Although it unfortunately seems to be the conviction of the Bush regime that there is no dialogue in the current crisis, that is not the model we honor, nor is it the model offered by

Vergil himself. He was writing the kind of epic that Bakhtin apparently did not appreciate, not about the closed and finished past, but rather about past and present ambiguously fusing; he was invoking a Turnus and Aeneas, whose story was not long since formed in durable Roman cement, but two characters whose way of confronting issues brought to mind recent and contemporary political figures and contemporary crises that still remained unsettled in 19 B.C., that in fact remain unresolved today.

The greatest error in dealing with an epic as probing and sensitive as the *Aeneid* is to adopt an either-or position. Either Vergil exalts or he exposes Augustus; either he calls us to admire the selfless dedication or to deplore the self-deceiving inhumanity of Aeneas; either he condemns the ruthless individualism of the war in Italy (which alludes to the ethos of the late Republic) or he condemns the autocratic ambition which created the Principate. There aren't many left now who think of Augustus, with Ronald Syme of 1939, as another Adolf Hitler. Nor surely does he resemble Hussein or our noble Bush. As the various descendants of the Harvard School have modified its one-sidedness, they have approached a dialogism that, I think, does not need apology. It may seem a bit tired to Farrell, but it should say more to our Sad Nineties, on the brink of unjust war, than the message of the Neo-traditionalists: that Vergil was adhering to a simple Aristotelian view of just anger in delineating Aeneas; that Vergil was sketching out the pattern of ideal kingship in Aeneas and defective kingship in Turnus—that simple.

The poetry and so-called history that survive from the time of Sallust to Ovid provide our main evidence of continuous plurality of voices about the revolutionary political and cultural changes at the end of the Republic. Bakhtin made an unfortunate distinction between the dialogic quality of comedy and satire and, on the other hand, epic; between the actual and the “finished” nature of the two. Neither Vergil nor his audience would have accepted that distinction. The *Aeneid* is richly dialogic; the tragedy is not that we Latinists have failed to reach the wider world audience. It is that we have not even persuaded ourselves to explore and aptly ponder this dialogic masterpiece.

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