

Elisabeth Henry, *The Vigour of Prophecy. A Study of Virgil's Aeneid*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press. Pp. xii, 228; 3 ill. \$24.95. ISBN 0-8093-1591-2.

James J. O'Hara, *Death and the Optimistic Prophecy in Vergil's Aeneid*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990. Pp. xii, 207. ISBN 0-691-06815-1.

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Here are two new books treating closely related themes and, inevitably, subjecting the same evidence to comparably detailed scrutiny. They are about the same length, and both are the work of well-informed Vergilians who are also good writers. But, within these parameters, they are probably as different from one another as it is possible to be.

Elisabeth Henry studies the effect on interpretation of the *Aeneid* brought about by increased attention to the knowledge that characters in the poem owe to prophecy and memory. She marshals her evidence in nine chapters, which are accompanied by a brief preface, summaries of Vergil's life and of the *Aeneid* itself, two appendices, a select bibliography, and indices of names, key Latin words, and Vergilian passages. The book is evidently the fruit of many years' teaching and reflection, and is distinguished by a close familiarity not only with Vergil's text, but with an impressive range of *comparanda* extending from the material culture of archaic Latium to Vergil's influence on modern poetry from Thomas Hardy to Robert Lowell. The author's humanism and humanity are evident in generous measure throughout the work.

In spite of these strengths, however, the book struck me as generally unsatisfying. Henry's approach and interpretation are extremely traditional, by which I mean not just that she favors what has come to be called an "optimistic" reading of the poem, but that her way of arriving at this reading strikes me as rather dated. She is aware of the neoconservative approach exemplified by Philip Hardie and others; but her own method is much less self-aware, even at times naive. One small but telling example concerns her failure to detect irony in Vergil's use of epithets. Having taken another scholar to task for laboring the (I thought) obvious, even commonplace point that characters described as *laetus* in the *Aeneid* are generally in for trouble,<sup>1</sup> I am embarrassed to find that Henry sees no irony at all in these descriptions, and indeed makes *laetitia* a sign of that special quality that animated the Romans as a people, a kind of confidence in the future which Allen Tate calls "the vigor of prophecy" in a phrase that Henry takes as the title of her book. It is of course true that prophecy often gives rise to joy in the *Aeneid*; but it remains to ask whether the joy is well-founded, something that Henry does not do (in sharp contrast to O'Hara: see below). The same is true of *pietas*. Aeneas is *pius*: Vergil said it, Henry believes it, and that settles it. Thus on such an occasion as that celebrated critical shibboleth, *at PIUS Aeneas, quamquam lenire dolentem* etc. (4.393-396), there is no hint of irony, no suggestion that the quality manifested by Aeneas is a mysterious and, perhaps, an unattractive thing: the epithet totally exonerates him of any guilt in abandoning Dido.<sup>2</sup> The same tendency can be observed in the author's interpretation of larger narrative and symbolic elements. There

is a marked tendency to ignore or pass over the cost in human terms of Aeneas' fated mission and to focus instead on the big picture; or, as Henry at one point puts it, following Aristotle, to maintain "an apprehension of 'things as a whole' (*ta kath' holon*) rather than of 'things taken individually' (*ta kath' hekaston*)" (p. 155). But when the matter is put in this way, it seems clear that this is no model for interpreting Vergil. If the overall view of things *sub specie aeternitatis* is really all that matters to Vergil, then why does he persist in wasting the reader's time with such lovingly detailed attention to all of those appealing victims of fate, to whom we are supposed to remain indifferent?

Along with this preference for simple, optimistic answers to questions that leave others, optimist and pessimist alike, brooding and uncertain, goes an oddly selective approach to bibliography. It is not that Henry doesn't know the scholarship; but often she seems not to confront or take seriously its full implications. Sara Mack's excellent *Patterns of Time in Vergil*, a book that should have left more of a mark on Henry's thinking, is mentioned only once in passing.<sup>3</sup> Scholars like Michael Putnam and Ralph Johnson too are cited occasionally; but the full weight of their conclusions is basically ignored. Only in her last chapter does Henry acknowledge the reality of the "Harvard school" of criticism; but, while she notes there that "Virgil has expressed with overwhelming intensity the cruelty of Juno, the anguish of so many young deaths, the affront to human endeavor in Aeneas' own moments of brutality and crumpling weakness," and that "to set up Virgil's hero, against all this, as an idealised monarch, or perfected soul, can only appear to the modern reader as an inadequate makeshift," (p. 165), she is nevertheless able, focusing on "Roman order, Pax Augusta, with warring goddesses reconciled in lasting peace," to conclude that "the prophetic glimpses of this newer world which illuminate the poem, sometimes at moments of extreme horror and darkness, suggest that the traditional view of the *Aeneid's* final import may be justified" (176). Justified, that is in very traditional, not to say old-fashioned and even discredited, terms. Thus Aeneas is presented to us as a Stoic hero (cf. *Index nominum* p. 218 s.v. "Aeneas: Stoic qualities") in a way that even the neoconservatives, such as Karl Galinsky,<sup>4</sup> have repudiated. By appealing to this canard, Henry attempts to justify, in a very few pages (166-172) and with a minimum of comment, Aeneas' maddened slaughter of the Italians in Books 10 and 12, the human sacrifice that he offers to Pallas' shade, and, of course, the death of Turnus. The aggregate impression is that Henry simply refuses to take seriously scholarship that conflicts with her uniformly optimistic reading of the poem, of which there has been quite a lot.

The most interesting, or potentially interesting aspect of Henry's book is its attention to the theme of memory. This is indeed a fascinating, important, and largely untapped area of study; and so it will remain, at least for the time being, since Henry barely scratches the surface. Most of her observations are true, so far as they go; but many questions go unasked, particularly the sort of questions that tend to complicate one's view of the poem as describing the faultless trajectory of a good man and true into the pantheon of heroes worshipped by the Roman world-state. There is, for instance, a pronounced ambivalence about memory in this poem: like oblivion, it has its attractive and repellent aspects. To speak of specifics, it is clear that memory and forgetfulness have a great deal to do with what happens in the underworld, and the fact that Aeneas behaves in Books 7-12 as if he had forgotten everything he learned there is puzzling and, to many, disturbing. Not to Henry. What Aeneas gets from his visit to the underworld is a "general awareness of the rightness of things" that is "not inconsistent with the supposition that the Hades-experience has been entirely forgotten by Aeneas after his return to earth" (155). This is the familiar "big-picture" approach once again: what Aeneas learns during his catabasis is all basically good and ennobling, and it enables him to discharge his fate with joy and a calm acceptance of heaven's will, even if we can't point to anything in particular that he remembers about this crucial experience,

and even if some of the actions that he performs after it are not very lovable. Again, although Henry is correct to see an important relationship between memory and prophecy, the one is not a subset of the other. Indeed, the memory theme is so vast and important that it cannot be handled adequately in a study of such limited scope. Properly contextualized, it would be seen not only as a theme in this one poem, but as a crucial element in the epic tradition that stretches from Homer on one end to Dante on the other, and beyond; also as an important element in the rhetorical training that Vergil and his readers received as young men; and probably as an ancient forerunner of the mediaeval and renaissance tradition of ethical and moral memory that Frances Yates has studied.<sup>5</sup> Of these contexts Henry gives us no hint. I do not mean to complain that Henry did not write a different book; but I would not want readers to think that she has said anything like the last word on this subject.<sup>6</sup>

James O'Hara also considers the role of prophecy in shaping one's reading of the poem. In contrast to Henry, he focuses tightly on this theme, allowing its significance to a global interpretation of the *Aeneid* to emerge gradually, without overt attention to its possible ramifications. The book itself, though somewhat Teutonic in its monographic structure (three of the five chapters sport appendices; there are also introduction, bibliography, *index locorum* and *index rerum et nominum*), presents its case gracefully and convincingly.

O'Hara starts small, establishing the existence of a pattern that is shown to be common in the *Aeneid*. Time and again the poet allows some character to expound a prophecy that is encouraging to