

## PATHOS, TRAGEDY AND HOPE IN THE *AENEID*\*

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In the course of this century fashions in classical scholarship have come and gone; out in the wider world the Victorians have fallen from grace and been restored to it again; but throughout this time there seems to have endured a picture of Virgil as a Victorian poet *avant la lettre*, a Tennysonian aesthete, languidly and compassionately melancholic, shedding warm soft tears as he contemplates the perennial sorrows of humanity. 'Sunt lacrimae rerum'—we are wary of that phrase now, conscious that it cannot bear the significance traditionally attributed to it; but the idea persists that Virgil views the world as a vale of tears. The modern critics do not put it quite that way—they prefer longer and less perspicuous words—but that is none the less, I think, what many of them are really saying.

For this persistence there is, in some degree, a very simple explanation: that such an interpretation contains a large measure of truth. But we may question whether it is the whole truth, the more especially since it is strikingly at variance with the view of Virgil that has predominated for most of the two thousand years since he wrote. Augustine and Dante and Milton and Dryden did not, I suppose, underestimate the grief and compassion in his poetry; but they also saw him as a confident proclaimer of the imperial order. Tennyson himself, if his poem on Virgil is read carefully, can be seen to have depicted a Virgil less Tennysonian than is commonly supposed. It might be wise to consider whether previous generations have anything to teach us about Virgil, and indeed about poetry generally; for there is a certain provincialism—a provincialism not of place but of time—in the assumption, so commonly and casually made, that the academic culture of the later twentieth century has achieved an understanding of the nature of poetry denied to the great minds of the past. At all events, it would be sensible to enquire whether there are particular circumstances in our own century which might tend to bias the interpretation of Virgil in the direction which it has taken.

First, however, let us remember the constant risk that the high-mindedness of secondary epic may become priggish. It is a risk which some have felt that the *Aeneid* fails to overcome; and there are signs that Virgil himself was alive to the danger. Sometimes he is fierce where there seems no compelling need for him to be so. Anchises ends the show of heroes in the underworld by talking of war; the whole poem ends suddenly on a note of violence. Now it can be and has been argued that Virgil writes these passages as he does to enforce a pessimistic picture of the human condition—I shall indeed return to this question—but the same argument can hardly be applied to the majestic speech which Jupiter makes to Venus in the first book, smiling, the poet tells us, and wearing the face with which he calms the skies and storms. He prophesies a glorious history for the Roman people, culminating in the time of Augustus, when peace will reign and the gates of war be closed, and he ends by depicting Furor bound with a hundred brazen chains, howling and dribbling blood:<sup>1</sup>

Furor impius intus  
saeva sedens super arma et centum vinctus aënis  
post tergum nodis fremet horridus ore cruento.

Here is no questioning note. This is a symbolic picture of peace and order triumphant, a little like those medieval representations of St. Michael and the serpent; but observe the eager savagery with which it is expressed. Virgil did not have to end this serene speech in a spirit of ferocity; he chose to do so.

Once we begin to seek reasons why twentieth-century readers might be anxious to find Virgil pessimistic or melancholy, we find them easily enough. First, there is the idea

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<sup>1</sup> *Aen.* 1. 294–6 (calm expression: 254 f.).

running through much modern historiography of Rome, sometimes openly, sometimes concealed, that Augustus was an ancestor of Bonapartism, or worse still a classical Mussolini; it thus becomes imperative to detach Virgil from this monster, an aim which is achieved by maintaining that he is, in some degree at least, a critic of the imperial order. Secondly, there is a feeling that tragedy is the highest form of literary art. A distinguished critic of Homer is explicit on this point. The *Iliad* is a greater poem than the *Odyssey*, he says, in part because it is a tragedy; the tragic view of life is, alas, more deeply true than the sort of story which brings events to a happy ending; tragedy can therefore give us profounder insights into the human condition.<sup>2</sup> Those who accept this line of argument will not be able to turn the *Georgics* into a tragic poem, but they may well be eager to represent the *Aeneid* in as tragic a light as possible. Thirdly, modern criticism has been much concerned with ambiguity and ambivalence. Ambiguity has been considered the essential literary value; and from this it has been deduced, usually without specific argument, that dogma, optimism and assertion are inimical to great literature. The *Aeneid* contains, on the face of it, some spectacularly, even embarrassingly confident assertions; many critics want to modify their effect.

Now the critic's task is to tell the truth: if our investigations lead us to think less well of Virgil than we did before, we must not shirk the conclusion. But there will be little danger of this painful result, for I believe that there is in all three of the views that I have described, besides an element of truth, an element of misunderstanding. Can we be certain that tragedy is necessarily the highest form of art? Maybe there is nothing in literature better than the *Iliad*, *Hamlet* or *King Lear*; but one can also think of very great works which do not seem to be tragic in any degree at all—*De Rerum Natura*, the *Georgics*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *The Mastersingers*—and others which, while containing tragedy, do not seem to offer a tragic view of life as a whole: *The Divine Comedy*, the *Oresteia*, indeed, if we view it entire, Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth Symphonies, *Parsifal*.<sup>3</sup> Maybe tragedy is the highest form of art; maybe it is not; an honest agnosticism can suffice, since it is clear, at all events, that literature which is not tragic can reach heights great enough for us to need feel no compulsion to force those works which we most admire into the tragic genre.

There is a further consideration. We have to do not only with the 'tragic view of life' but with tragedy as a means of presenting and interpreting the suffering which all of us, whatever our moral and religious beliefs, know to be part of the human lot. This is a subject at once so complicated and so hackneyed that a very few words must here suffice. As Aristotle knew, tragedy is different from horror. Those things which in our ordinary discourse we most easily call tragic—earthquake and famine, the torture and murder of innocents—are not, within literature, the matter of tragedy at all: they are too ghastly. Tragedy requires a kind of greatness, and that greatness resides not merely in the literary form, nor even in the quantity or intensity of the suffering represented, but in its quality. A. J. A. Waldock observed of Sophocles, 'Antigone is of tragic stature: Creon does not approach within hail of it . . . his talent for suffering is not vast.'<sup>4</sup> By that he meant that Antigone experiences not more pain than Creon but a different kind of pain. Whether one agrees with Waldock's judgement or not, one can appreciate the value of the distinction he is making. Further, the greatness of tragedy distinguishes it not only from sheer horror but from pathos.<sup>5</sup> Pathos is not necessarily less affecting than tragedy; Virgil, indeed, provides a superlative illustration of this fact. Creusa's parting from Aeneas is supremely

<sup>2</sup> J. Griffin, *Homer* (1980), 46. Though, anyway, it is only in a limited sense that the *Iliad* is more like real life than the *Odyssey*. The *Iliad* is concerned with greatness, with exceptional human beings; the *Odyssey* is a transfiguration of ordinary life, which through the strange medium of folktale and heroic myth has profound things to say about man and woman, man alone and man in society. None of us is an Achilles, each of us is to some degree an Odysseus.

<sup>3</sup> I include the musical examples for the sake of the observation that music critics do not seem to be embarrassed, as their literary counterparts so often are, by the expression of confidence, serenity or joy. Nor do the art

critics appear anxious to underplay the joyousness found in some of the works of (say) Titian or Tiepolo. There may be a certain parochialism about those literary critics who search for the half light upon all occasions.

<sup>4</sup> *Sophocles the Dramatist* (1951), 123, 125.

<sup>5</sup> A distinction nicely brought out by Tovey's observation that contemporaries objected to the titles of Brahms's *Tragic Overture* and Tchaikovsky's *Symphonie Pathétique* but that in either case the composer knew best (*Essays in Musical Analysis* (1935), vol. 2, 151).

moving because she so carefully avoids the tragic note:<sup>6</sup> she wishes her husband to be consoled and strengthened, to be able, in a metaphorical sense, to forget her, and it is a testimony to her goodness that she succeeds: he never speaks of her again. Here is lyric pathos at its highest.

Nor is it certain that the tragic view of life is truer than any other; but in any case it is unclear that what we should be looking for in great literature is 'truth' in the ordinary sense of the term; truth in some sense, maybe, but in a sense that we shall find very hard to define and possibly do not clearly understand. Perhaps this consideration may also have some bearing on many readers' reluctance to associate Virgil too closely with Augustus; though here once more I touch briefly and superficially on a question of extreme complexity.

The purpose of reading is not self-congratulation: what we should seek in great literature is not our own ideas but a great idea, and indeed one of the reasons for studying great literature is to enlarge our understanding of the human heart and mind by entering into views of the world alien, even repugnant, to our own. The morality of the *Iliad* is one which, were anyone to espouse it today, we should be forced to condemn with the utmost vigour. But what matters is not that Homer's idea should be a 'true' idea, at least in the ordinary sense, but that it should be a great and profound idea; and this his readers understand well enough. Dante's conception of power and authority—Shakespeare's too, for that matter—is deeply unattractive to our notions, and this too their readers understand. But such indulgence is not so gladly extended to the writers of the Augustan age. Dante, after all, was a medieval man, Shakespeare an Elizabethan, and the Homeric epics come out of an archaic society; but the Augustans are expected to know better. We seem still to be prisoners of the perceptive half-truth popularized by Matthew Arnold in one of his best essays:<sup>7</sup> that certain periods of ancient history—the fifth century in Athens, for example, or the first century in Rome—were peculiarly 'modern' epochs. That idea is not false, but it can certainly be misleading. If we seek in Virgil, or in any ancient Roman, the sort of humanely liberal enlightenment that we find so extraordinarily pleasing as we contemplate it in ourselves, we are destined for disappointment.

Many people today also tend to assume that the ideologies of monarchy and imperialism are necessarily shallow or dishonest. That is an assumption which a wider knowledge of literature and history can dispel. We may indeed find that Virgil's poetry is in itself a powerful disproof. For the present, I can do no more than mention in passing my belief that Virgil not only reflected Augustan ideology but was an important force in shaping it. In some ways Virgil was an Augustan before Augustus himself was: back in the thirties, when he was working on the *Georgics*.<sup>8</sup> I would also suggest that he displays a sharper understanding of political reality than any other Augustan writer. He saw which parts of Augustus mattered and which did not. Like his admirer Tacitus, he concentrates on peace and authority when he writes about Augustus; the scheme of the *Aeneid* gave him splendid opportunities to expand on the recovery of liberty, the restoration of the republic, the drive for moral purity; he passes them by. The poet who had written so emphatically about *libertas* in the first *Eclogue* now lets the theme drop: he was not deceived. This may be some consolation to those who wish to drive a wedge between Virgil and his master; but it is a superficial judgement to suppose that he was unimpressed by Augustus because he recognized that parts of the programme were bogus or unimportant. It is both subtler and more plausible to see Virgil as a man with the sympathetic understanding to discover where Augustus' genius lay (for he was a genius, as hostile historians have acknowledged from Tacitus to Syme).

The question of ambivalence is of the first importance; but it must be put to one side for the time being.<sup>9</sup> I shall return to it later, after having looked in more detail at some individual parts of the *Aeneid*. But first let us consider the scheme of the poem as a whole.

<sup>6</sup> *Aen.* 2. 767–95.

<sup>7</sup> 'On the Modern Element in Literature' (1857).

<sup>8</sup> In L. P. Wilkinson's *The Georgics of Virgil* (1969) the chapter on 'Political and Social Ideas' includes a section entitled 'Augustanism'; rightly so.

<sup>9</sup> A general observation, however: I do not know how one could do justice to Virgil without using terms like 'ambivalent', 'ambiguous', 'equivocal' and so on. But if we insist that all good poetry must have such qualities in more or less ample measure, we shall miss both the

If we are to understand the view of life presented by the *Aeneid*, we must look to the comparison with Homer which Virgil forces on our attention. The fact that the poem parallels the Homeric epics throughout is so familiar, and Virgil's skill with this technique so great, that we easily forget how extraordinary a procedure it is, and how massive were the obstacles to its success. Sometimes they were too great for even Virgil to surmount: in the third book, as Aeneas plods his way through a flat and compressed reworking of Odysseus' wanderings, we become awkwardly aware of how much better primary epic is at this sort of thing. It is worth pausing to reflect upon the poet's few weaker moments, if only to remind ourselves of the scale of his technical achievement the rest of the time.

He was himself in no doubt about the difficulty of his task, if we may believe the anecdote in the Suetonius-Donatus life: it is easier to rob Hercules of his club, he is said to have observed, than to steal a line from Homer.<sup>10</sup> Evidently there must have been some great purpose behind this scheme, and if we are to understand it, the mere citation of parallel passages will not be enough. Virgil uses Homer for comparison and contrast: by setting his own vision against the ethos of the Greek epics, he brings out his own distinctive view of the world. And if Virgil is the poet we take him to be, the comparisons and contrasts will extend beyond individual passages: they will be essential to the meaning of the poem as a whole.

Sometimes the comparison shows us the Homeric sparkle turned to tragedy. Take the case of Dido, who has to sustain in her single person the roles of Calypso, Nausicaa, Circe and Penelope;<sup>11</sup> in a sense the formidable literary weight that she has to carry is a part of her tragic burden; and she collapses beneath it. When we first catch sight of her, she is likened to Diana surrounded by her nymphs in a simile modelled upon the description of Nausicaa in the *Odyssey*.<sup>12</sup> The scene of Nausicaa and her maidens washing clothes and playing ball is the first depiction in European literature of happiness, simple happiness. And no tragedy is to destroy it: there will be nothing more than a gentle poignancy at the parting, delicately understated in the telling. The possibility of Nausicaa being seduced by Odysseus simply does not arise in our minds. Part of the pathos of Dido is that she is, in a sense, a Nausicaa who has been made vulnerable. And from another point of view she is a Calypso and a Circe, but without the divinity which she would need to sustain these roles. Circe can part from Odysseus with good cheer; Calypso grieves, but she is not destroyed by her grief, nor—since Odysseus never learns why she lets him go—is she humiliated, as Dido will be, before her lover. Dido has Nausicaa's sweet youthfulness, Calypso's passion, Circe's latent barbarousness, but without their resources.

What is more, she is so situated by Virgil that we can see her as a would-be Penelope, without Penelope's hopes or fulfilments. She is faithful, at least in intention, to an absent husband, but to one who is dead and can never return. She wishes to be Aeneas' wife and the mother of his child, but she has no Telemachus, and soon even the hope of a 'parvulus Aeneas' is to be snatched from her. She is besieged by suitors but without the hope of rescue, since her besiegers include not only the resistible Iarbas but the irresistible Aeneas himself; Virgil's metaphorical structure, surrounding her with images of a city invested and captured, makes the hero into both friend and enemy.

The story of Dido, then, shows Virgil taking a Homeric model and 'turning these notes to tragic'. But with an epic as austere and solemn as the *Aeneid*, the central comparison, when we regard the poem as a whole, must be with not the *Odyssey* but the *Iliad*. 'Maius opus moveo,' the poet declares,<sup>13</sup> as he turns from the 'Odyssean' to the 'Iliadic' *Aeneid* (to borrow Otis's terms); and when the poem in its entirety is set against Homer, the *Iliad* must prove the 'maius opus' too. Virgil took an astonishing risk when he

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individual character of Virgil's work and his capacity for variety. In view of the influence exercised by Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* it may be worth making two points. First, Empson was a mischievous man who admitted that he used 'ambiguity' to mean whatever he liked and that his first type alone covered virtually everything of literary importance (op. cit., introduction to the second edn.). Secondly, he did not make the common mistake of thinking that ambiguity

was necessarily a good thing: he censured Wordsworth's *Lines written above Tintern Abbey* for being ambiguous where ambiguity was out of place (ch. 4).

<sup>10</sup> *Vita Vergili* 46.

<sup>11</sup> Not to mention the roles of Hypsipyle and Medea from Apollonius' *Argonautica* and of Ariadne from Catullus 64.

<sup>12</sup> *Aen.* 1. 498–504; cf. *Od.* 6. 102–9.

<sup>13</sup> *Aen.* 7. 45.

invited his readers to measure him against the world's greatest poem. What did he want them to learn from the comparison?

The view of life expressed in the *Iliad* is a deeply tragic one, but there is an enormous buoyancy and vitality about the poem none the less. And one need not look far to see that the buoyancy and the tragedy, strange though it may at first sight seem, are in fact part and parcel of each other. Consider the famous simile of the leaves in the sixth book, inserted into Glaucus' speech rather inorganically, as though the poet intended a significance for it beyond the immediate context:<sup>14</sup>

As are the generations of leaves, so are those of men. The wind scatters the leaves on the ground, but the forest buds and puts forth more, when the season of spring is at hand. Even so one generation of men puts forth and another ceases.

Leaves die; *but* (and herein lies the profundity of the idea) the spring will come again and other leaves will grow in abundance; growth and newness are the themes with which the simile comes to its close. When Mimnermus took up the leaf simile, he spoke of spring and fall, but not of the coming of another spring; the languor of a pessimistic hedonism replaces the Homeric energy.<sup>15</sup> Virgil in the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, Dante in the third canto of his *Inferno*, take up the theme with similes describing the fall of the leaf; Milton's *Paradise Lost* describes the leaves already fallen.<sup>16</sup> Homer alone looks onward to nature's everlasting power of renewal. Life, the *Iliad* declares, is charged with vigour, energy and glory; this is wonderful and yet terrible, for there is nothing, at least nothing worthy of desire, once life is over. Vigour and energy are everything and death is the negation of vigour and energy. What is worse, life can only be lived fully at the risk of its being cut brutally short, for the finest thing in life, the supreme expression of human greatness, is war. Battle is κιδιάνειρα, glorious, but it is also cruel, miserable and humiliating. Therefore, the hero's life is by necessity both immensely desirable and immensely miserable, and so the *Iliad's* vision of the human condition is necessarily tragic. And that is the terrible vision against which the *Aeneid* of set purpose measures itself.<sup>17</sup>

Homer has had many interpreters; Virgil is the best of them. We must assume that he understood the *Iliad* to be a tragic poem, and that he knew what he was doing when he chose to measure his own epic against it. Those are, I admit, assumptions; but if we do not make them, we shall probably have to conclude that the *Aeneid* is not, after all, much of a success.

Let us then cast a Homeric light upon what have been seen as some of the most striking expressions of Virgil's pessimism. In his very first paragraph he tells us that his theme will be a man of outstanding virtue pursued by the unforgetting anger of Juno, and he concludes with a famous question, 'tantaene animis caelestibus irae?'<sup>18</sup> There is no answer; only a terrible silence before Virgil, after the pause, resumes his narrative in quite another tone.

It sounds despairing; but it is not. We must not underestimate the bleakness of Virgil's cry; but equally we should remember that Jupiter, some two hundred and fifty lines later, assures Venus that Juno will change and come to cherish the Roman race.<sup>19</sup> Though many men will suffer greatly before she is induced to relent in the last book of the poem, ultimately her purpose can be altered. In the *Iliad*, however, we learn that Hera and Athena will remain implacable until the utter destruction of Troy. We have only to carry Virgil's question across to the *Iliad* to realize that Homer could never have asked it or even

<sup>14</sup> *Il.* 6. 146-9.

<sup>15</sup> Mimnermus fr. 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Aen.* 6. 309 f.; *Inf.* 3. 112 ff.; *Paradise Lost* 1. 302 ff.

<sup>17</sup> I would myself go still further. In Britain a view of the *Iliad* has predominated which represents it as a moral drama pivoting upon the ninth book. According to this view Achilles goes wrong when he rejects the offer made by the embassy and remains in the wrong until he recovers himself in his final scene with Priam. Some have thought otherwise, among them Goethe, who rightly held Homer's Achilles to be the supreme portrayal of human greatness in literature: it is the

greatness of Achilles' character, not its weakness, that leads him to treat the embassy as he does. In other words, it is his very greatness which directs him to a course that entails the death of his beloved Patroclus; thus his particular situation is sheerly tragic, complementing the *Iliad's* tragic view of the human condition in general. Those who disagree with this interpretation will at least allow that the *Iliad* is for other reasons a tragic poem; those who agree will see it as more deeply and remorselessly tragic still.

<sup>18</sup> *Aen.* 1. 11.

<sup>19</sup> *Aen.* 1. 279-82.

thought of asking it. The answer is too obvious: of course the gods bear such resentments—and resentments still worse. We may recall the ghastly coolness of the scene in the fourth book where Hera asks Zeus for the destruction of Troy. She offers a concession. Three cities are dearest to me, she says, Argos, Sparta and Mycenae. Destroy them whenever you take a dislike to them; I do not grudge them to you.<sup>20</sup> That is how Hera treats even her favourites; Virgil's Juno is mild in comparison. Virgil's protest may be baffled and sorrowful, but it is something that he can protest at all: it is a sign of his comparative hopefulness that he can express shock and an appalled wonderment at something which the *Iliad* takes for granted.

At the other end of the poem Virgil utters another unanswered question:<sup>21</sup>

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

The lines are characteristically Virgilian in fusing the note of triumph and the note of melancholy into a single phrase. So much waste of life and passion, futile to all appearances; and yet such a wondrous future. The pathos and the hopefulness come together, and the hopefulness dominates in the end: as we read the lines aloud, we hear the sentence rise to its climax with the words describing the everlasting peace that is to come. In view of the centuries of conflict between Rome and her Italian neighbours, we may feel that there is some *suggestio falsi* here; when we consider how different a picture of the future Virgil could have painted, we may realize how deliberately he chose to balance the pathos with a strongly affirmative note.

Virgil's purposes, it must be admitted, are not always plain to see; a passage in the tenth book may serve to illustrate the problems. Pallas, about to face Turnus and knowing himself outmatched, prays to Hercules for aid.<sup>22</sup> The god hears him, but can only groan and weep. Jupiter addresses him in consoling words, 'dictis . . . amicis', but his message is austere:<sup>23</sup>

stat sua cuique dies, breve et irreparabile tempus  
omnibus est vitae; sed famam extendere factis,  
hoc virtutis opus.

Many sons of gods fell before Troy, Jupiter continues, his own child Sarpedon among them; Turnus too will shortly meet his end. The god turns his eyes away from the battlefield, and a few lines later Pallas is dead.

The Homeric model for this episode is famous. In the sixteenth book of the *Iliad* Zeus sees that Sarpedon will fall to Patroclus. He reflects briefly on whether he should save him. Hera charges him not to, consoling him with the suggestion that he bid Sleep and Death carry the body back to its home in Lycia. Zeus complies, shedding tears of blood upon the ground to honour his dear son.<sup>24</sup>

Virgil's scene is a fine one, but not without some awkwardness: to this reader at least its inferiority to its Homeric counterpart is too clear for comfort. That cannot have been Virgil's intention; however, he does choose to signal his imitation of Homer here with a more than usual degree of explicitness. More exactly—and this may prove significant—he draws attention to the name of Sarpedon: 'quin occidit una | Sarpedon, mea progenies.'<sup>25</sup> What is his purpose?

We must conclude, I think, that, sombre though the scene is, it offers us a view of life more hopeful, less sheerly tragic than Homer's. Hercules' tears are stoically answered by Jupiter; it is not the supreme god who weeps, as in the *Iliad*, though Virgil could easily have made him do so. Jupiter's tone is not so very far from Horace's in his lament for Quintilius: 'durum; sed . . .', 'It is hard, but . . .'<sup>26</sup> Life is brief and irrecoverable, there is

<sup>20</sup> *Il.* 4. 51 ff.

<sup>21</sup> *Aen.* 12. 503 f.

<sup>22</sup> *Aen.* 10. 457 ff.

<sup>23</sup> *Aen.* 10. 466 ff.

<sup>24</sup> *Il.* 16. 431 ff.

<sup>25</sup> *Aen.* 10. 470 f.

<sup>26</sup> *Carm.* 1. 24. 19.

no dodging that bitter fact; but—notice that ‘sed’ again—the brave man has a task to do. The sentence is shaped so that it moves towards an affirmative conclusion. Posthumous glory, Jupiter asserts, is indeed a goal worth striving for.<sup>27</sup>

No Homeric god, no Homeric hero could ever have spoken quite like that. It is indeed Sarpedon, in the twelfth book of the *Iliad*, who most memorably sets out the conditions of the hero’s life; and this may well be why Virgil introduces his name. He reminds Glaucus that they two are honoured above other men by the Lycians, who look upon them as gods and give them seats of honour, the best of the meat, more wine and so on. Therefore they must fight in the front line of battle, so that the Lycians may say that their rulers are not without fame.<sup>28</sup> This is, of course, a passage which deserves a far closer consideration than can be given here; but it is well understood that Sarpedon is not talking about duty or loyalty, for he goes on to say that if they could be ageless and immortal, he would not fight among the foremost himself nor urge Glaucus into glorious battle. It is not, therefore, for the Lycians that Sarpedon is fighting; the battle is, in an ordinary sense, quite useless, and the tragic paradox of the hero’s lot is that it is his very mortality which compels him to engage with death, without the prospect of doing any good to himself or his people. It is a vision of the extremest bleakness. Turn to the praise of stoical virtue uttered by Virgil’s Jupiter, and see how consoling, by contrast, is the tone.

Perhaps we should remember, too, that the scene among the gods before Sarpedon’s death is of the first importance in the poetical economy of the *Iliad* because it foreshadows the moment before the death of Hector himself. Once more Zeus ponders whether he should save a man dear to him; this time it is Athena who answers, repeating three lines from Hera’s speech, but adding no note of consolation whatever.<sup>29</sup> The echo of the earlier scene brings out the utter hopelessness of Hector’s situation, a hopelessness deepened by the terrifying lightness of Zeus’s brief reply: cheer up, he says in effect: I didn’t mean it seriously. So casually can the supreme god handle a man he likes. The gods treat men not as wanton boys treat flies, but rather as they treat their toys: they love them, play with them, break them according to their pleasure. And Hector, let us recall, achieves nothing by his end: he faces the humiliation of panic and death, but gains no advantage for his people thereby; instead, as Priam rightly tells him, his death will ensure the destruction of his family and city.<sup>30</sup> Once again, it is a situation of the starkest tragedy; once again, consider how much Aeneas ultimately achieves for his people, his descendants, even for himself, and see how much less stark is Virgil’s picture.

We shall return to the Homeric comparison later; but for the moment I shall turn aside to a part of the poem where, though the formal model may be Homeric, the essential sources of inspiration are from Italy.

Throughout the *Aeneid* the idea of progress is present. It is brought out for the most part by countless small touches; here the examination of one passage will have to suffice. Occasionally Virgil suggests that the Trojans have a soft, oriental streak; the fullest treatment of this motif comes in the ninth book, where the Italian warrior Remulus jeers at the Trojans in a speech modelled on the boasting speeches in the *Iliad*:<sup>31</sup>

non pudet obsidione iterum valloque teneri, bis capti Phryges, et morti praetendere muros? en qui nostra sibi bello conubia poscunt!	600
quis deus Italiam, quae vos dementia adegit? non hic Atridae nec fandi fictor Ulixes: <i>durum</i> a stirpe genus natos ad flumina primum deferimus saevoque gelu <i>duramus</i> et undis; venatu invigilant pueri silvasque <i>fatigant</i> ,	605
flectere ludus equos et spicula tendere cornu.	

<sup>27</sup> Tennyson’s Ulysses recalls the sentiment: ‘Death closes all; but something ere the end, | Some work of noble note may yet be done, | Not unbecoming men that strove with gods’ (*Ulysses*, 51–3).

<sup>28</sup> *Il.* 12. 310–28.

<sup>29</sup> *Il.* 22. 166–87.

<sup>30</sup> *Il.* 22. 38–76, esp. 56 f. and 60–5.

<sup>31</sup> *Aen.* 9. 598–620.

at patiens operum parvoque adsueta iuventus  
aut rastris terram domat aut quatit oppida bello.  
*omne aevum ferro teritur*, versaque iuencum  
terga *fatigamus* hasta, nec tarda senectus 610  
debilitat viris animi mutatque vigorem:  
canitiem galea premimus, semperque recentis  
comportare iuvat praedas et vivere raptō.  
vobis picta croco et fulgenti murice vestis,  
desidiaē cordi, iuvat indulgere choreis, 615  
et tunicae manicas et habent redimicula mitrae.  
o vere Phrygiae, neque enim Phryges, ite per alta  
Dindyma, ubi adsuētis biformem dat tibia cantum.  
tympana vos buxusque vocat Berecynthia Matris  
Idaēae; sinite arma viris et cedite ferro. 620

Just before the speech begins, Virgil tells us that it will contain a mixture of good and bad: Remulus shouts things ‘digna atque indigna relatu’.<sup>32</sup> Evidently the poet is anxious not to be misunderstood. He also informs us in advance that Remulus is about to be killed, and by Ascanius at that, a mere boy; which casts an ironic shadow forward upon the speaker’s boastful sense of superiority. And another sardonic shadow is cast back upon his invective when Ascanius slays him: it is Remulus, the advocate of dour Italian toughness, who has proved to be full of idle words, and the Trojan who is laconically brief:<sup>33</sup>

‘i *verbis* virtutem include superbis!  
bis capti Phryges haec Rutulis responsa remittunt’:  
hoc *tantum* Ascanius.

The substance in Remulus’ abuse of the Trojans is much like what we hear from Iarbas in the fourth book and Turnus in the twelfth when they are attempting to belittle Aeneas: a loose association of luxury, peculiar clothes, sloth, effeminacy and the cult of the Great Mother.<sup>34</sup> Shortly before Iarbas’ speech Virgil tells us that Rumour mixes truth and falsehood:<sup>35</sup> the poet’s method, as we have been told for many years now, is subjective, and hearing what Iarbas and Turnus say, we conclude that there is much distortion and wishful thinking in their jealous words, but an element of truth also. Virgil invites us to give the same verdict upon Remulus.

There is therefore a certain doubleness in the way we are invited to regard the Trojans. Fundamentally we are with them, we know that justice and destiny are on their side, but tugging against this feeling is the suggestion—not much more than a hint, but distinctly perceptible—that there hang about the Trojans qualities faintly distasteful. This fairly simple tension can be found in several places in the poem; here in the ninth book it is combined with another which is emotionally stronger and more complex. Line 607 is taken, with two small modifications, from the second book of the *Georgics*;<sup>36</sup> Virgil probably hoped that some of his readers would notice the echo. But without that recognition his meaning can still be grasped; what we can recognize in any case is the language of Italian conservatism: the familiar idea that it was the old, hardy, frugal life of the Italian countryside that made Rome great. It has recently been argued that Virgil here echoes his earlier work to a pessimistic end: we see a tough, admirable character out of the *Georgics*, it is suggested, killed by an outsider, and our sense of Italian patriotism is outraged. Fuller consideration may dispel this view; for Virgil’s purposes are subtler.

Remulus is not a modern Roman or an Augustan but a Rutulian of the heroic age, and Virgil’s historical sense makes him realize that this character should not speak just like Sallust or Horace or indeed the poet of the *Georgics*. As he rants on, a harsher, more primitive note enters. He exults in banditry; and even if there is a soft, oriental side to the

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, 595.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, 634–6.

<sup>34</sup> *Aen.* 4. 215–17; 12. 97–100.

<sup>35</sup> *Aen.* 4. 188 and 190.

<sup>36</sup> *Geo.* 2. 472.



Trojans, his philistine contempt for the arts and graces of life is something which we can hardly approve. Virgil assuredly did not.

But suppose that we take lines 603–11 on their own and ask how they affect us before Remulus moves on from sturdy patriotism to sneering at a lesser breed. There is much, surely, to earn our admiration: young men courageous and energetic, old men still vigorous in mind and body—how can we not applaud? And our approval will not be moral alone; because of the association of such discourse with Italian patriotism we feel an emotional stirring at the roots of our national consciousness. ‘durum . . . duramus . . .’—a key word from the *Georgics* echoes through this speech. Yet our reaction, even to the earlier part of Remulus’ utterance, is not one of simple enthusiasm. The word ‘durus’, as we may learn from the *Georgics* also, has its rough and even cruel side; it is inherently ambivalent. And that is not all. As we look closer, we find that here is not the chastened but firm patriotism of the *Georgics* after all, but something of a coarser fibre. ‘fatigant . . . fatigamus . . .’—another repetition, and one with an overtone of brutality to it. That impression is confirmed by Remulus’ callous attitude to children and animals alike, and his thoughtless pleasure in the destructiveness of war. ‘We first take our sons to the rivers and harden them in the fiercely icy waters’—well! ‘Cold baths before breakfast made me the man I am’—that sort of harsh complacency is hardly the voice of the *Georgics*. The curious resemblance of lines 603 ff. to the sentiments traditionally attributed to the dimmer products of the dimmer public schools is in a sense an accident; and in a sense not. The kind of smug insensitivity that disguises itself as manliness is recurrent in human nature. Remulus turns out, somewhat surprisingly, to be rather a realistic figure.

What Virgil has done is to excite a complex emotional reaction. We have not only mixed feelings about the Trojans but mixed feelings of a different sort about the Italians; and these perhaps of a more testing kind. It looks as though we shall be able to enjoy the easy warm throb of patriotic sentiment, and then we are denied—no, half-denied—that pleasure. It is not that Remulus’ attitudes are worthless: he says things ‘digna . . . relatu’, after all. We do feel the patriotic tug at the heart, but we also feel that his values are inadequate. This doubleness is compressed into the brilliant phrase in line 609, ‘omne aevum ferro teritur,’ which means so much more than Remulus intends. We share his pride in the strength and valour of Italy, but beyond this we sense the Virgilian awareness of imperfection, of a golden age lost, with all the complexities of sensibility which that involves; we feel too in those rasping words—rasping in sound and sense—that there is a hardness of heart in Remulus, or (to borrow a metaphor from another place) that the iron has entered his soul. Patriotism of this kind is not enough.

What will be needed is a blending of the Trojan and Italian virtues, a purging out of the Trojan and Italian faults. And that, the *Aeneid* tells us, is more or less what will come about. The complex, many-sided presentation of these peoples is thus an expression of Virgil’s historical sense. Remulus is not an Augustan in fancy dress; a process of development will be required to transform the values of his epoch into those of Augustus’ age. The seeds of Virgil’s own values are there, as the echo of the *Georgics* teaches us, but they will need time for growth and careful husbandry. And this is a hopeful picture of history: Virgil sees not only change but progress.

I turn now to one of the most famous passages in all Latin literature: the closing sentence of Anchises’ speech describing the show of heroes in the sixth book:<sup>37</sup>

excudent alii spirantia mollius aera  
 (credo equidem), vivos ducent de marmore vultus,  
 orabunt causas melius, caelique meatus  
 describent radio et surgentia sidera dicent:  
 tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento  
 (hae tibi erunt artes), pacique imponere morem,  
 parcere subiectis et debellare superbos.

<sup>37</sup> *Aen.* 6. 847–53.

The sense of pain expressed in the first part of this sentence is perhaps greater than most interpreters suppose, surprising though that may seem. The words become more not less moving if we hear the rather clumsy cliché of Roman thought that lies behind them.<sup>38</sup> Of course the Greeks were first rate at art and philosophy and that sort of thing; it was splendid for a young man to spend some time in Athens acquiring a gloss of knowledge and sophistication; but as far as the manly virtues were concerned, the life of action and ambition, of politics and war—well, the Greeks were poor creatures enough. With a modesty born of condescension, one might allow, *de haut en bas*, that captive Greece had taken her rude conqueror captive,<sup>39</sup> but only because one was so very sure, deep down, that Rome was best at the things which mattered most.

These were plump, comfortable sentiments; but by Virgil they are sharpened to poignancy. He makes a closer connection between the Greek supremacy in the things of the mind and the Roman supremacy in arms than did his compatriots: Anchises implies that it is precisely because the Romans are directed to the tasks of war and government that they must leave the triumphs of art and thought to others. The Roman destiny is achieved at a cost. Gone too is the complacent hope, such as we hear from Cicero, for example, that the Romans can domesticate the Greek achievement and make it their own. Others will be better orators (how Cicero would have hated that); there is no qualification, no prospect that this state of affairs can ever change.

Not only must the Roman pay a price for his glory, but that price is very great. Here too Virgil departs from the mass of his countrymen: he will not blandly assume that the business of sculpture, astronomy or whatever is manifestly a lesser glory than the work of empire. How seductive he makes that statuary appear: the writing has been vigorous and direct in the previous lines, culminating in a thumping great quotation from Ennius, robustly heavy with the stressed monosyllable of its conclusion:<sup>40</sup>

unus qui nobis cunctando restituis rem.

Now the language turns softly mysterious as in curious phrases Virgil calls forth the beauty of art. The Greeks become magicians almost, miracle workers: the bronzes breathe, the marble lives beneath their hands; to anticipate Ovid's myth, they turn into a race of Pygmalions, warming a multitude of statues into life. Indeed with the word 'ducent' we watch the actual process of metamorphosis, the gradual transformation of brute stone into humanity. 'mollius', 'ducent'—it is all so delicate, so strange.<sup>41</sup>

Who now shall say that the cost of empire has been cheap? And yet Virgil does not let the matter rest there, in a soft, wistful ambivalence. It is at such a place as this that we must understand how like the poet of the *Aeneid* is to the poet of the *Eclogues*; and how unlike. The greatness of the passage is that the softness and wistfulness remain, and yet are caught up and carried along by a rhetorical momentum of fierceness and power. We must, as the examiners say, identify the context; and to do that, we must look both forwards and back.

In the early part of his enormous speech Anchises is thoughtful of Aeneas: 'Look,' he says; 'Do you see?' 'This is the man promised you' ('aspice', 'viden', 'hic vir, hic est, tibi quem promitti saepius audis').<sup>42</sup> But gradually the father seems to forget his son. The sight of Pompey and Julius Caesar overcomes him, and he cries out to them to refrain from civil

<sup>38</sup> For example, Cicero's *Pro Flacco* 9: 'verum tamen hoc dico de toto genere Graecorum: tribuo illis litteras, do multarum artium disciplinam, non adimo sermonis leporem, ingeniorum acumen, dicendi copiam, denique etiam, si qua sibi alia sumunt non repugno'; but the Greeks lack 'religio' and 'fides'. (The double way in which Greece was regarded is developed at 61 ff.: the 'vera atque integra Graecia' of the past is contrasted with the degenerate present, and there is warm praise of the beauty and glories of Athens: the city's fame still sustains the nation's broken reputation.)

<sup>39</sup> Horace, *Epp.* 2. 1. 156 f.

<sup>40</sup> *Aen.* 6. 846, cf. Ennius, *Ann.* 370 V.

<sup>41</sup> Tentatively one might suggest another conclusion.

Anchises says nothing about poetry: perhaps Virgil wanted concision here, or perhaps he refused to acknowledge another people's superiority in this field. But we may wonder whether Virgil would have wished, even on behalf of Lucretius and himself, to dispute the crowns of Homer and Aeschylus. May it not rather be that in the very silence about poetry there is another stab? Anchises cannot bring himself to identify the Greeks by name—'alii', he says; and likewise perhaps the thought that in poetry too, even in poetry, the Greeks will forever stand supreme is too unkind for utterance.

<sup>42</sup> *Aen.* 6. 771, 779, 791.

war.<sup>43</sup> The two dynasts are left unnamed: Aeneas can have no idea of what his father is talking about. 'Who could pass you by in silence, great Cato, or you, Cossus?' Anchises asks a few lines later.<sup>44</sup> 'Why not?' Aeneas might reasonably reply. He must be bemused by all this: what's Cossus to him or he to Cossus? This is no inadvertence on Virgil's part, as we can see from the end of the eighth book, where Aeneas gazes upon the shield depicting the history of his descendants, with pleasure but 'rerum ignarus', not knowing what he sees.<sup>45</sup> There is indeed a pathos in Aeneas' fighting and suffering for a future that he will never fully know or understand. In the sixth book, similarly, it is Virgil's deliberate purpose that Anchises should eventually leave Aeneas far behind; as we can see from the last vocative in his speech, 'Romane'. For whom is he addressing? Not Aeneas, who is not a Roman and never will be: Virgil has made it abundantly clear that centuries will elapse between the death of Aeneas and Rome's foundation.<sup>46</sup> Anchises' speech begins coolly; the excitement and agitation grow as it proceeds; at last under the tremendous rhetorical pressure that has been forced into the verse the contextual framework breaks open and Anchises projects himself out of his proper position in time and space to address the distant future. Out of the past, out of the dead, across a thousand years and from another species of existence, Anchises calls to each and every Roman; here, now, in the empire of Caesar Augustus. Rightly understood, that 'Romane' is the most dramatic word in Latin literature.

Aeneas' visit to the underworld ends on a dying fall, with the lament for Marcellus. That famous passage is aesthetically incoherent unless Virgil fully accepts the value of the imperial destiny. You cannot make a long *diminuendo* unless you begin *forte*; you cannot turn your mood to melancholy if you are melancholy already. It is because Virgil has reached a height of emphatic assertion greater perhaps than can be found anywhere else in the poem that he makes Anchises pause at this point and then gives him another five lines to make the transition towards Marcellus. Virgil is the supreme master of transition, and it was a right instinct that led him to drop gradually towards the elegiac note.

But we do not need Marcellus to show us the strength of affirmation at the end of Anchises' speech. Form and content are perfectly married in it; the moral meaning is shaped by the aesthetics of climax. It would be poetically meaningless for Virgil to impose upon Anchises the mighty illogicality of addressing the poet's contemporaries if all he is going to say is, 'Well, Roman, your destiny will be a second best, and a rather dubious one at that.' As we have seen, Anchises has worked himself up across nearly a hundred lines into an immense enthusiasm; whatever he says now must be charged with power. If we look only at that final sentence, the same moral emerges. It is divided into two parts, the first dealing with the Greeks, the second with the Romans; the second part answers the first, and indeed outsoars it in the monumentality of the last line and a half. The sentence reaches its climax with the heavy and sonorous syllables of 'debellare superbos'. Anyone who reads these lines and does not put a massive weight upon those last words is cheating.

If anyone doubts this, let him make an experiment. Let him read these seven lines, giving a melancholy or dubious inflection to the last three of them. It can hardly be done without discomfort. Now let those last lines be read with an eager, emphatic hardness; at once the rhetoric falls into place. The final line begins with words recommending clemency to the conquered, and it would be very wrong to deny the importance of mercy in Virgil's scheme of things. But it is no less wrong to quote the words 'parcere subiectis' on their own, without completing the line; those who do so shirk the seriousness, severity and complexity of Virgil's thought. He knew what 'debellare superbos' meant: devastation, slaughter and enslavement; captives dragged in chains through the streets of Rome and strangled in the Tullianum. In the fierceness of these final words, as in the entrancing softness with which the Greek achievement is evoked, he shows that he knows the price to be paid. I have not understated the pathos in those lines about the Greeks; indeed I have been concerned to stress it; for the truth is that everything in this sentence is charged with an exceptional intensity: the price is great, the reward is great, and the almost musical balance between the two limbs of the sentence enforces the message that the greater the

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, 832–5.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, 841.

<sup>45</sup> *Aen.* 8. 730.

<sup>46</sup> Note especially *Aen.* 1. 272–7.

price, the greater the reward must be. The splendour and the profundity of the passage are due to this: that Virgil counts the cost and counts it fully; and yet he accepts.

Let me offer an analogy. Imagine a back-bencher sitting in the House of Commons in 1940. He is not only a politician but a literary critic, and unfortunately he is a bad literary critic. As he hears the new Prime Minister declare that he has nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat, he says to himself, 'Notice the ambivalence, the doubt and the questioning; the sensitive listener can tell that Churchill's heart is not wholly in the struggle against Hitler', and he leaves the chamber in a state of cultivated despondency.

Now plainly that example is absurd: nobody responded to Churchill's oratory in that fashion. Instinctively everyone knew that in counting the cost he made his sentiments stronger and fiercer, the determination keener, the ultimate triumph more glorious. The comparison is worth making because great poetry appeals to the simple emotions as well as to the most complex. However, we can also try a purely literary analogy. Dante records the inscription over the gates of Hell.<sup>47</sup> It occupies three stanzas exactly. The first emphasizes the pain and ruin that lie beyond, the third the eternity of the punishment. In between is perhaps the most terrible sentence in all the *Divine Comedy*; which is saying much. Justice moved God to create Hell, declares the inscription; divine power made it, supreme wisdom and primal love. Love created all this torment; the paradox is appalling to contemplate.

Passing across Acheron, Dante meets the inhabitants of the first circle of Hell; the eternal air trembles with their sighs. Who are these sorrowing multitudes? the lustful? the cruel? Not at all: these are the virtuous pagans, who did not sin, but are punished only because, being born before the coming of Christ, they could not worship God aright. 'For no other fault are we damned,' Virgil explains, and concludes, 'Without hope we live in desire.' Great grief seizes upon Dante at these words; as well it might.<sup>48</sup>

There is one interpretation of this passage, apparently attractive, which no one, so far as I know, has yet put forward. It goes like this. 'Dante cannot have swallowed the harsh dogmatism of the medieval church whole; it would be crude to suppose so. Instead we have something more complex and ambivalent. The inscription on the gate makes the sensitive reader aware of this ambivalence, for anyone can see that however great a man's sins, eternal suffering must of necessity be a punishment greater than the crime. Through the words about primal love Dante's doubts about God are still more clearly heard. The undercurrent of uncertainty and protest is even plainer in what follows: the first of the damned are good men; Virgil trembles and grows pale when he thinks of the anguish of Hell's inhabitants; Dante weeps with pity for Francesca da Rimini. There is a tension between the public voice of Dante, loudly proclaiming the love and justice of God, and a private voice, tremulous with doubt and sorrow. That tension is far richer and subtler than a rigid triumphalism could be. To represent Dante as an uncritical propagandist for this God is to degrade the poet.'

Since this argument is so similar to claims commonly advanced about Virgil (with Augustus and the Roman empire taking the place of Dante's God), it is worth asking why we so immediately reject it. Partly we do so because of external evidence derived from Dante's life and other works; but a more interesting reason lies within the poem itself. The terror and beauty of the paradox which Dante sets before us depend upon its being accepted literally and without flinching. If we try to resolve the paradox into an irony, the glory and the tragedy disappear, and an easy sneer at the Deity takes their place. So too with the just pagans, or the doomed lovers Paolo and Francesca. The wonder and horror that we feel at their fates derives from a recognition of God's love and justice; they are tragic, and not merely melodramatic, because they are so sympathetic and yet so rightly condemned. In purely aesthetic terms Dante's conception, with its intellectual and moral rigour, proves better than hesitations, doubts and questionings.

I have drawn out this example because it seems so clear; let us now see whether a similar line of argument might be applied to the more controversial case of Virgil. Virgil was a master of ambivalence from the start; the *Eclogues* are exquisite in their balancing of pride and modesty, pleasure and regret, and so on. But he was also astonishingly

<sup>47</sup> *Inf.* 3. 1-9.

<sup>48</sup> *Inf.* 4. 25-45.

ambitious: his first work challenges comparison with the best Hellenistic poet, his second with the best Latin poet (for Lucretius, not Hesiod, is the true presiding genius of the *Georgics*), his last with the best of all poets whatsoever. There is a tension in his work between his expansive ambition and his impulse towards miniaturism and perfectionism; a tension which twice at least he allows to become the matter of his verse. The proem of the third book of the *Georgics* is in part a *recusatio*: he asks Maecenas, in effect, to leave him alone to complete the work upon which he is embarked.<sup>49</sup> Yet it also looks out beyond the *Georgics*, promising, in elaborately metaphorical language, a future poem celebrating the deeds of Octavian, with glances back to a very distant past.<sup>50</sup> This is a scheme both like and unlike the *Aeneid*: like in that it both glorifies Caesar and incorporates different periods of history, unlike in that the poem which Virgil eventually wrote reverses the plan suggested in *Georgics* by describing a very distant past with glances forward to the present day. This suggests that he is giving us a genuine glimpse into the development of his ideas: he is half-way—but at this stage no more than half-way—to solving the problem of how to eulogize his benefactor in a poetically tolerable form. On the one hand is a desire for the time and tranquillity needed to bring the *Georgics* to perfection: on the other a serious response to the call to venture something more grandiose and more thematically complex than he had attempted before.

A similar tension is implied in the conclusion of the *Eclogues*:<sup>51</sup>

haec sat erit, divae, vestrum cecinisse poetam,  
 dum sedet et gracili fiscellam textit hibisco,  
 Pierides . . .  
 surgamus: solet esse gravis cantantibus umbra,  
 iuniperi gravis umbra; nocent et frugibus umbrae.  
 ite domum saturae, venit Hesperus, ite capellae.

On the surface this is one of those neat, calm conclusions characteristic of the *Eclogues*: the beasts are fed, the day closes, and the poem closes with it. But there are less comfortable notes. Enough, enough, we hear, 'saturae' echoing 'sat'; and we recall that Virgil began the poem by revealing that this would be his last essay in the pastoral mode.<sup>52</sup> The shade, hitherto the very essence of the pastoral scene, is now felt, as never before, to be something harmful to the singer. 'surgamus' is ambiguous: do we arise to stay within the herdsman's daily round or to escape from the pastoral world altogether?<sup>53</sup> The poet clings to the beauties of bucolic miniature, represented by the basket of slender mallow, and yet chafes to get away from them. All that exquisiteness, it seems, those delicacies and ambivalences, could take him only so far; and it was time to go further. He turned next to Lucretius; what did Lucretius teach him?

Lucretius expounded a dogmatic system, and yet he carried Latin poetry to heights greater than it had reached before. He sets out the views that he is to reject with superb eloquence, only to ride over them by calmly asserting the truths of Epicureanism. This is a method clearly allied to what we call ambivalence in other authors, though the term no longer seems very satisfactory in a case such as this; at all events Lucretius' method of giving the other point of view is not the enemy of dogmatic assertion, but subsumed into it. Virgil learnt from him; what was ambivalence in the *Eclogues* is caught up in the *Georgics* into the affirmation of confidence, love and pride. This is again a matter which deserves the most careful analysis, and again a very brief example will have to suffice. In the second book there is a paean to the glories of Italy. Virgil approaches it by way of describing the wonders of other countries in terms which recall the fabulous qualities of the golden age: among the Chinese and the Ethiopians wool grows on trees, in Media is a

<sup>49</sup> *Geo.* 3. 40 ff.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, 34 ff.

<sup>51</sup> *Ecl.* 10. 70–2, 75–7.

<sup>52</sup> *Ecl.* 10. 1: 'Extremum hunc, Arethusa, mihi concede laborem.'

<sup>53</sup> An ambiguity caught by Milton at the end of

*Lycidas*: 'At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue: | Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new.' Will tomorrow bring more pastoral poetry or poetry of another kind? As a further subtlety, the rhythm puts the stress upon 'woods' in the first phrase, upon 'new' in the second.

fruit which counteracts poison, and so on.<sup>54</sup> Then he turns to Italy, declaring that it surpasses even such wonders as these.<sup>55</sup> The whole book is about variety and diversity, what can be grown on a particular soil and what cannot: he is in love with imperfection, and holds that the diversity exemplified in Italy, with all the limitations which that implies, is better than the marvels of other places, magical or paradisaical though they sound.

In the *Georgics* this argument is worked out across sixty lines or more; if we turn back to Anchises, we shall see the same pattern of thought in a mere seven. The Greeks, like Media and Ethiopia, are made to sound like the workers of miracles; and then the voice of national pride rises in response. Lucretius describes the worship of Cybele or the laments of those in fear of death in terms which make us for a while enthralled by the goddess or assured that death is an evil; and then he corrects us.<sup>56</sup> It is a rhetorical technique of great power: the more eloquently falsehood is allowed to speak, the more impressive is the capacity of philosophy to confute it. Virgil was not dealing with straight truth and falsehood, but the same principle applies: the more splendid foreign lands or Grecian civilization are made to appear, the more formidable is the answering voice. Ambivalence does not disappear from Virgil's later poetry—on the contrary, it persists and develops into still subtler, richer forms—but in the process it is incorporated into a larger whole in which strength and firmness of assertion find their place along with all those complexities and delicacies of sensibility. It has been the fault of some Virgilian criticism to stress the latter qualities and miss the former; but it is part of Virgil's greatness that he is hard as well as soft, strong as well as gentle. Here is one more way in which his career is an extraordinary combination of change and continuity: just as his Alexandrianism stayed with him throughout his strange development from neoteric virtuoso to epic bard, so too he remained the master of ambivalence all the while he was transforming himself from the inventor of faint, fleeting beauties to the hierophant of imperial power.

It is time to turn to the end of the poem, and to return to the comparison with Homer. Notoriously the ending of the *Aeneid* is harsh and abrupt. Very much has been written about the final scene; I shall not attempt to add to this, but shall rather try, without I hope underestimating the harshness, to place the death of Turnus in a wider context.

Some readers have been struck by the contrast between the reconciliation between Priam and Achilles which dominates the last book of the *Iliad* and the absence of any reconciliation between the human actors in the last book of the *Aeneid*, and have deduced from this that Virgil's mood is harder or more bitter than Homer's. That is to take a superficial view of the matter, to undervalue both the greatness of the Homeric conception and Virgil's imaginative understanding of it. For the ending of the *Iliad* is a resolution which is no resolution. On one level it appears that the last book of the *Iliad* is full of wrongs put right, of wounds bound up. Achilles displays a generosity which seems unique to himself: no other hero, we feel, would have chosen, unbidden, to return a part of the ransom to the man who had paid it. The rhythms of life, disrupted by the hero's wrath, are restored. Achilles, who has not eaten, now eats and compassionately urges Priam to eat; Achilles, who has refrained from sex, is last seen lying with Briseis; Hector, who has been denied his funeral rites, now receives them in abundance: the women keen over him one after the other, the body is burnt, the tomb raised, and the poem ends, almost like a fairy story, with a glorious banquet in the halls of Priam.

But upon a deeper consideration there is no comfort, nothing soothing in the last scenes of the *Iliad*. Think of Priam's final words to Achilles: for nine days let us mourn Hector, he says, and on the tenth day let us bury him, and on the eleventh day let us raise a tomb; and on the twelfth day we shall fight, 'if so it must be'—εἴ περ ἀνάγκη.<sup>57</sup> There is despair in this: 'if', says Priam, and we know that the wish is hopeless. Must it be? Yes, it must. Nine days, ten, eleven, twelve: in Priam's last words to Achilles we hear time moving remorselessly forward. The *Iliad* ends with feasting; the *Aeneid* ends poised on the brink of hell. In structural terms the conclusion of the poem is slow, ample and complete; in immediate personal terms the encounter between Priam and Achilles does honour to

<sup>54</sup> *Geo.* 2. 116 ff.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, 136–9.

<sup>56</sup> *Lucr.* 2. 600–60; 3. 894–930.

<sup>57</sup> *Il.* 24. 664–7.

human nature; the contrast between these things and the horror that is to come is incomparably tragic.

Virgil understood all this very well; for is it not clear, once we look more closely at the *Iliad*, that he has inverted Homer's scheme? In the *Aeneid* it is in terms of the superficial structure that there is no reconciliation between the hero and his adversaries, no funeral of Turnus, no marriage with Lavinia. But we know that these things are to come. It is worth remembering that Virgil faced a difficult technical problem. I confess that I have never read the 'thirteenth book of the *Aeneid*' composed by the Italian humanist Vegius, which can be found in many early editions of Virgil, but one has only to consider what might be in it to realize how wise the poet was to end where he did. Noble speeches of forgiveness and reconciliation would be intolerably flat; and the meeting between Aeneas and Lavinia, two people who have never met and mean nothing to each other, is rich in possibilities of embarrassment. But characteristically Virgil has turned a difficulty into a strength: he promises reconciliation in advance (he even has Amata kill herself in anticipation of Turnus' death) and thus leaves himself free to compose an ending without parallel for speed, density and excitement. Even within this final scene, it might be noted, there is a comparison with Homer's poem not at all to Aeneas' disadvantage. At intervals throughout the *Iliad* there are scenes of supplication on the battlefield, increasing in emotional intensity and culminating in Hector's plea to Achilles that he return his corpse and not allow the Achaeans' dogs to devour it.<sup>58</sup> Every one of these supplications is refused; the only supplication granted in the *Iliad* is Priam's to Achilles in the last book. Turnus supplicates Aeneas, as Hector supplicated Achilles; but there are also significant differences. Turnus begins by declaring that he has deserved to die and does not beg for life (Hector had said neither of these things); he then asks Aeneas to pity his father Daunus, to return the body to his people, to prolong hatreds no further.<sup>59</sup> Is the supplication granted? Virgil is moving with such rapidity that he does not pause to tell us so; but he does not need to, for we are sure that it is. In the midst of the passion and violence that surround Turnus' death, the poet can admit a glimmer of better things.

More importantly, the whole of the last scene lies under the shadow of the last scene among the gods, which reconciles Jupiter and Juno. And what a reconciliation that is. The old pattern is to be broken and a new order to begin: a new race is to be created; a great goddess is to change her mind and come to the support of her former enemies.<sup>60</sup> There is to be a reconciliation among men, as among gods; not a brief evening's friendship, as in the *Iliad*, but, as we have already seen, an alliance 'aeterna in pace'. The *Iliad* ends with ritual and feasting; but deep down nothing has changed. The *Aeneid* ends with an act of violence; but deep down everything has changed. Which of the two endings is, in the larger view, the more hopeful? Which has the more tragic vision of life? To each of those questions there can be only one answer. Nowhere perhaps did Virgil use the Homeric comparison more brilliantly than at the end of his poem. The contrast with the stark tragedy of the *Iliad* combined with the dramatic harshness of the final lines enables him to blend ferocity and hope, and through that blend to present a view of life which, whether or not we accept it ourselves, we should recognize as deeply serious and deeply realist, neither complacent nor glibly pessimistic.

The *Aeneid* is filled with the deaths of beautiful and admirable young people: Dido, Marcellus, Nisus and Euryalus, Lausus, Pallas, Camilla, Turnus. So much waste, so

<sup>58</sup> *Il.* 22. 338–43.

<sup>59</sup> *Aen.* 12. 931–8.

<sup>60</sup> It may be debated how fully and immediately Juno commits herself to Rome: some take Virgil's implication to be that she will not be completely on the Roman side until after the Punic Wars (there are recent treatments of this topic by D. C. Feeney, 'The reconciliations of Juno', *CQ* n.s. 34 (1984), 179–94 and E. L. Harrison, 'The *Aeneid* and Carthage', in *Poetry and politics in the age of Augustus*, ed. T. Woodman and D. West (1984), 95–115). My own conviction is that Juno, while maintaining her hostility to the Trojan name and civilization, now commits herself fully to the Latins and the future Roman state. Crucial are 11. 826 f.: 'sit

Latium, sint Albani per saecula reges, | sit Romana potens Itala virtute propago.' It is strained to take these lines as spoken in a grudging tone; rather, they mark a rhetorical climax. We should note too Juno's joy at the news that the Romans will honour her above all other people (840 f.). If there is an 'inconcinnity' in Virgil's picture, it is rooted in the facts of history: for Juno was indeed both a great Roman goddess and (being identified with Tanit) the presiding deity of Carthage. But whether the transformation of Juno's attitude be supposed fast or slow, it cannot be denied that transformation there is, or that the reconciliation between men is permanent and complete.

much grief. No reader is unaware of this; but the distinction between tragedy and pathos should be remembered and some qualifications made. Most of these figures are treated with an elegiac pathos rather than with truly tragic effect. Marcellus, Lausus and Pallas are not like Homer's Achilles and Hector, or Sophocles' Oedipus, or Hamlet or Lear: they have charm and loveliness, not greatness; they are not torn by internal struggles; they face no terrible dilemmas. Further, though these beautiful young men die, they die to some purpose. As we have seen in the Remulus episode, and as may be seen in many other places in the poem, Virgil suggests to us an idea of progress. Trojans and Italians are alike imperfect, and from the merging of the two races a new and better race is to be formed. We have this from the highest authority, Jupiter himself:<sup>61</sup>

hinc genus Ausonio mixtum quod sanguine surget,  
supra homines, supra ire deos pietate videbis, . . .

To this great end the war proves to have been essential. The defeat of the Italians is the cause of Juno's change of heart, and it is through the concessions granted to her in return for that change of heart that Italy can triumph in defeat, retaining its language and customs and advancing towards a more glorious future. Just as Virgil is Homer's best critic, so Dante and Milton may be estimated the best critics of Virgil. Dante saw the truth. Near the beginning of the *Divine Comedy* he speaks of a coming saviour mysteriously described as 'the greyhound':<sup>62</sup>

Di quell' umile Italia fia salute,  
per cui morì la vergine Camilla,  
Eurialo, e Turno, e Niso di ferute . . .

He shall be the salvation of that lower Italy, for which died the  
maiden Camilla, Euryalus, Turnus and Nisus of their wounds.

Both sides are intertwined in this list of names: not only Turnus and Camilla, but two Trojans also. They all died for Italy, Dante says; and he is right.

The fall of Troy in Virgil's second book is without question tragic; the tragedy of a nation. Among individuals, Dido is undoubtedly a tragic figure; it is not certain that there is a second such. What of Aeneas himself?<sup>63</sup> Let us reckon up the balance. He loses Creusa and Dido, gaining only Lavinia, who is nothing to him. He loses Troy. He gains a kingdom, which according to Jupiter in the first book he holds for only three years, though the sixth book seems to have a different conception.<sup>64</sup> He is left with a son, with victory, with the certainty of future fame; and he will become an *indiges* after his death, a deity of the Italian nation.<sup>65</sup> Does this amount to a tragic lot? Perhaps bleak would be the better word. Indeed, a darker thought suggests itself. Perhaps Aeneas' last misfortune is that after all he has endured, he is not permitted to be a tragic figure; that final splendour is denied him. Such a paradox would not be out of keeping with the subtleties of Virgil's art.

Even should we judge Aeneas to be a tragic hero, Virgil's view of life as a whole is not tragic. Rather it is melancholy (for the picture of a Tennysonian Virgil is not wholly inaccurate); were anyone to ask whether it is possible to be a melancholy optimist, an answer might be that the *Aeneid* is in part an exploration of that profound paradox. The deaths of Lausus and Euryalus and the rest are not necessary and inevitable—Euryalus especially is a pitiable fool, who brings about the needless destruction of his lover and himself; they are sad side-effects of the progress of the Roman destiny, part of a whole war which is in itself an accident. For how did it begin? Ascanius shot a stag, and by a horrible mischance that stag happened to be Silvia's pet. That, it might be said, is either a false or

<sup>61</sup> *Aen.* 12. 838 f.

<sup>62</sup> *Inf.* 1. 106–8.

<sup>63</sup> And what of Turnus? One supposes that Virgil wanted him to be the tragic focus of the poem's second half, as Dido of the first. But if so, his execution did not match his intention: Turnus' death is sad, not in the

proper sense tragic. The truth is that he is just not interesting enough, and we see only his surface. He has not the size or the depth to sustain a tragic role.

<sup>64</sup> *Aen.* 1. 265 f.; 6. 764.

<sup>65</sup> *Aen.* 12. 794; an important point, often ignored.



an incomplete account: Juno's agent was at work in arousing the fury of the Italian countrymen.<sup>66</sup> However, Juno is to some extent a personification of the contingent sorrows of life, the accidents of existence. As we have seen, we can set her against the deities of the *Iliad* and observe how Virgil softens the terrors of the Homeric vision. We may treat the human actors similarly. In another generation Aeneas might have been happy and glorious in Troy; that is one reason why the loss of his city is such a grief to him. Even as it is, his sufferings are the product of his peculiar destiny, not of the general lot; but for the unique burden laid upon him, 'Romanam condere gentem',<sup>67</sup> he might have been comfortably resettled, like Acestes in Sicily, or Helenus and Andromache in Epirus, or with a loving wife in Carthage. But Achilles and Hector and Sarpedon are tragic of necessity: in the *Iliad* tragedy is the very stuff and significance of the hero's life, whoever he may be.

Homer, one is almost tempted to say, is a high-spirited pessimist, Virgil a low-spirited optimist; or in different terms, Homer is a tory, Virgil a whig.<sup>68</sup> Of course, these would be crude simplifications. It has been said that an optimist is one who believes that we live in the best of all possible worlds and a pessimist is one who fears that he is right. That goes to show the inadequacy of our labels; and in any case it is as unnecessary to pin a label upon Virgil as it would be misleading.<sup>69</sup> What matters is to see him as he is. He is a poet who throughout his life asked to be seen in relation to other poets; a man, moreover, who wrote an epic set in the distant past which looks forward constantly towards the distant future. It is therefore especially appropriate that we should look at him in the light of his successors. I have touched upon Dante, and I shall end with Milton. Tennyson has often been called the most Virgilian of English poets, but that is true only of the outward aspects; deep down, there is nothing more Virgilian in our literature than the end of *Paradise Lost*. Adam and Eve leave Eden:<sup>70</sup>

They, looking back, all the eastern side beheld  
Of Paradise, so late their happy seat,  
Waved over by that flaming brand, the gate  
With dreadful faces thronged and fiery arms.  
Some natural tears they shed, but wiped them soon:  
*The world was all before them, where to choose*  
Their place of rest, and *Providence their guide*: . . .

In the midst of ferocity and desolation comes a note of quiet but firm hope. Milton had in mind the account of Jupiter's purpose in the first book of the *Georgics*.<sup>71</sup> He has shown us the loss of paradise, and yet he sees, as Virgil had seen, that despite that loss—indeed because of it—a whole new world of action, choice and discovery lies before the human race. He invites comparison with the *Aeneid* also. Of course there are vast differences. Milton has been dealing with the supreme, indeed the only tragedy of mankind, to which all the woes that have afflicted humanity since are but a corollary; the sufferings of the *Aeneid*, great though they be, are incident to the hero's final victory. Milton describes failure softened by hope, Virgil success shadowed by sorrow. And yet:

<sup>66</sup> A certain amount depends on the interpretation of 7. 498, 'nec dextrae erranti deus afuit' (of Ascanius' aim). If the 'deus' is Allecto, the fact that Ascanius hit the mark (though not apparently the fact that the stag he had lighted upon was Silvia's) was at least partly the goddess's doing. If (as seems preferable) the reference to a 'deus' is little more than an epic manner of saying that Ascanius was successful, the divine malignancy is limited to exploiting the incident once it has happened; and Allecto, in this place at least, seems not far different in kind from the simple personification of Rumour in the fourth book.

<sup>67</sup> *Aen.* 1. 33.

<sup>68</sup> Separately, these judgements have been made

before now. 'I am . . . a violent Tory of the old school;—Walter Scott's school, that is to say, and Homer's' (Ruskin, *Praeterita* 1. 1); 'The *Aeneid* is a Whig poem' (J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent* (1981), 197).

<sup>69</sup> There is an especial difficulty of terminology. 'Optimist' suggests credulity, 'pessimist' cantankerous gloom. Other antitheses are no happier: 'positive' and 'affirmative' sound morally superior to 'negative'. When I use such terms (since I can find none better), they should be understood as having a purely descriptive sense and no evaluative content.

<sup>70</sup> *Paradise Lost* 12. 641–7.

<sup>71</sup> *Geo.* 1. 121 ff.

supra homines, supra ire deos pietate videbis . . .

The world was all before them . . .

With all their immense differences of theme, temper and belief, they have this in common, that they are yea-sayers, they affirm: beyond the ruck and reel of immediate circumstance, the furthest vision is of hope.

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