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## REMARKS ON THE TEACHING OF VIRGIL'S *AENEID*

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I was young once and I taught High-School age students earlier in my career. Youth is a time of strongly-held opinions: young people are prone to being utterly iconoclastic *or* conservative in their intellectual tastes (and the latter is actually more common in my experience). This of course is a function of insecurity, but it is not conducive to careful thinking. The *Aeneid*, whose generally civilized and clear exterior masks fearsome complexities, affords the educator an excellent opportunity to challenge students' propensity toward black and white thinking. Virgil's text, as I will have occasion to remark more than once, is quite honest about the at times chaotic condition of the universe and society. Virgil is not saying that the universe is always chaotic and that anomie (lawlessness) is always unavoidable. He is saying, rather, that the societies people make for themselves are always subject to unraveling and that there is always a price to be paid for them. But Virgil does not counsel despair. It is rather that he shows a keen intellect and compassionate heart in thinking about the human condition and the struggles (of which he always approves) to found a just society. Furthermore, Virgil does not give us easy answers, as it were, because he correctly sees that there are no easy answers to the existential questions that arise whenever men undertake to live together. At a base level, society demands that individuals subsume their desires for the good of the community and there will always be the vexed questions: Who must surrender their desires? How much is too little? How much is too much?

In my view, the reason the *Aeneid* affords an excellent pedagogical opportunity (over and beyond the latent complexity of the poem) can be boiled down to two reasons. In the first place, there is the generally quite clear plot structure. The opportunity costs of a base-level of comprehension are low. Students who are keen will have their bearings soon. Second, the way into thinking about crucial issues can be provoked by a simple question: "Does Virgil approve of Augustus and the changes that he has brought to the Roman world?" I think in the end it is quite possible to give a quick answer to this question. Of course he approves of Augustus. The shield at the end of book eight shows this. There we see an utterly heroic Augustus on Aeneas' shield:

In the centre [of the shield] could be seen the bronze-plated fleets battling at Actium...On one side was Augustus Caesar leading Italians into battle, having with him the senate and populace, the little Gods of Home and the Great Gods of the race. He stood on the high quarter-deck of his ship; gaily his brow discharged twin beams of light, and on his head dawned his father's Julian star. (Knight 221 [cf. Mandelbaum 212]<sup>1</sup>)

<sup>1</sup> I will be referring to two translations in this essay. "Knight" refers to the Penguin edition, which is the translation (by W. F. Jackson Knight) that is taught in the New Zealand schools. The second is the translation by Allen Mandelbaum from which I lecture when I teach the

This passage (and others that speak of the virtues of the Roman state, e.g., in books one and six) is tantamount to an endorsement of Augustus. An embrace of thorough-going irony at this point would be perverse. Especially when we note that Virgil correctly assumes that a reader will have awareness of the shield of Achilles from book 18 of the *Iliad*. Augustus is appearing in a divinely-crafted shield that recalls the divinely-crafted one of the greatest warrior the West has ever known. The reader of the *Aeneid* accordingly will remember the various scenes of the city at peace and the city at war on Achilles' shield and can associate Augustus with necessary war and the coming of peace through the medium of divinely engraved narrative.

However, sensitive readers of the *Aeneid* will note that while this endorsement is present, closer inspection of the poem reveals that the situation is not as simple as all that. The song of triumph has, at the very least, descants of sadness, brutality, and inexplicability. There is "a sympathy for a short-lived humanity" as we know when Aeneas looks at the frieze on the temple of Juno in Carthage (Knight 41 [cf. Mandelbaum 17]); Aeneas' anger at the end of the poem when he kills Turnus has disturbed many readers of the poem (Knight 338/Mandelbaum 336); Aeneas does not understand what he is looking at when he looks at the shield (Knight 223/Mandelbaum 214). What we want to make of the tears, anger, and incomprehension is, I think, ever a question. It is my assertion that Virgil is being honest about how we mortals can only do the best job we can in a task that will cause grief and anger and it is a task of which we can only have partial (and all too mortal) understanding. Governance and glory are surely things to be desired--why endorse Augustus through the martial glamour of Aeneas' Achillean shield otherwise?--but they will not be gotten without a struggle. A profitable way to gauge quite directly the glorious difficulty of this accomplishment and the trenchant nature of Virgil's engagement with serious issues, and these are issues that I think we want to share with our students, is to see how Virgil inflects his generally approving narration of the coming of Roman power with as honest an accounting as he is able to provide of the costs of empire. In the remainder of this essay, I propose to discuss the way Virgil reveals the costs through various confrontations and conflicts. I will treat in turn the Gods, the character of Aeneas, and the voices of the poet.

### Jove and Juno

The conflict between Jove and Juno is a good place to start to show the ways in which the glorious destiny is hedged about and penetrated by an intractable darkness that ever wants to come back. The Father of the Gods has fate on his side and pronounces any number of times that his will and fate are the same. Roman destiny is coming for the descendents of the Trojans and nothing will stop its arrival. Opposed to him is Juno and in starring position at the very beginning of the poem is her pursuing rage:

*Aeneid* at University. Full bibliographical information for both of these (and other works I refer to in the course of the essay) is available in the bibliography.

...Juno was ruthless and could not forget her anger...I pray for inspiration to tell...how the Queen of Heaven sustained such outrage to her majesty that in her indignation she forced a man famed for his true-heartedness to tread that long path of adventure, and to face so many trials. It is hard to believe Gods in Heaven capable of such rancor. (Knight 27 [cf. Mandelbaum 1])

In spite of the destiny that is promised there is severe anger in Juno and, as we all know, she shows it repeatedly over the course of the poem. Almost immediately in book one, there is the attack of the winds on Aeneas' fleet. One recalls the opening to book seven where Juno summons the fury Allecto from hell (Knight 184-185/ Mandelbaum 172-173). And even as late as book twelve her anger continues: speaking to her, Jove remarks, "surely you are sister to Jove, a second child of Saturn, for deep in your breast there surge such tides of anger" (Mandelbaum 332 [cf. Knight 335]). Although Virgil articulates a basis for this anger (her slighted beauty and the honour granted Ganymede [Knight 28/Mandelbaum 2]), the anger is "pointless" as it will do no good. As she herself admits, all she can do is delay the coming of Roman destiny; she will never be able to stop it. Indeed, when considered in this way, Juno's "pointless" activity, activity that has nothing tangible on offer in the way the destiny Jove is putting forward does, makes a perfect contrast to that of Jove. The universe is developing in a certain direction but there are forces of negativity that will always delay this development. Another way to understand this conflict between Jove and Juno (and hence to hear a descant to the song of triumph) is to relate it to the conflict between two of the major philosophical schools in antiquity: Stoicism and Epicureanism.

As is well known, Virgil's entire poetic project owes much to Lucretius and his long philosophical (and epicurean) epic, *On the Nature of the Universe* (*De Rerum Natura*).<sup>2</sup> Virgil in particular seems to have learned from his illustrious predecessor of fifty years earlier that hexameter poetry can and should have philosophical ambitions. There is much philosophy in the *Aeneid* and Virgil certainly set the standard for poets to come. Writing in the fourth century CE, the commentator Servius remarks in reference to the Platonism on display in book six that "poets invariably exploit philosophical sects as required by the essence of the context" (trans. Braund 1997, 206). There is discernable Platonism and Pythagoreanism and, which is to the point in the present moment, Stoicism and Epicureanism in the *Aeneid*.

If I may, I will now speak in general and simplifying terms about these two diametrically opposed philosophies. (Readers nervous at this point should know that I will circle back to the royal couple of heaven presently.) Stoicism was concerned with the importance of fate and with the need to endure whatever comes in life. Standards must be upheld and struggle may be unavoidable. The perfect stoic man will endure whatever it is that fate has given to him. His life may be an unhappy one full of struggle or be one of all ease. It is his role to endure no matter what and the goal is mastery of the self

<sup>2</sup> For more on philosophy and Virgil, see Braund and Gale.

in all situations. Whereas Stoicism counsels engagement and possible (even quite intense) struggle, Epicureanism in contrast sees the life to be lived as one that steers a middle course between things. Epicureanism is on occasion characterized by skeptics as being solely about pleasure as it tells people not to worry about big things and instead embrace a state of *ataraxia*. *Ataraxia* is a Greek term that we may translate as "Undisturbedness": the idea is that the life worth living is one that avoids the extremes. In pursuing *ataraxia*, one avoids the disturbing extremes of pain *or* of pleasure. The idea that too much pleasure may be a bad thing may at first strike some as incorrect, but thought about what happens in the case of over-indulgence in any of the things we like to do perhaps may bring to mind what is at issue. Furthermore, there is no belief in fate in Epicureanism. The basis of the world is instead the motion of atoms clumping together, as it were, and coming apart that creates an illusion of order in what is actually a random universe. The collision between the perspectives of Stoicism and Epicureanism is glaringly manifest on the subject of fate. The Stoics see a goal toward which everything is tending (and this most notably appears in the *Aeneid* in the various references to the coming of the Roman state and of Augustus), while the Epicureans see a universe in which a notion of any necessary connection between past and future is definitionally impossible.

Important too is their divergence on the proper way to live life. Stoicism promises neither happiness nor ease (though fate may allow that) and instead demands that we fit ourselves to our fate. We will have the satisfaction of having done the right thing. The epicurean approach suggests that we steer a course between extremes, which may entail efforts to avoid or ameliorate difficult tasks and situations. This epicurean avoidance is not stoic. As we will note below, this plays out notably in the character of Aeneas. But returning to the Gods, it is possible to associate the married couple of heaven with stoic and epicurean perspectives respectively. Jove is the representative of bounded and rational fate. He presides over the unfolding of destiny. Juno, on the other hand, opposes such things and her nature suggests a universe in which disorder and anomie are the rule, as it were. To get along in a Junonian universe--one in which stability (i.e., clumpings of atoms) *will be* punctuated by meaningless outbreaks of violence (i.e., the simple dissolution of these clumpings)--the only sensible way to act is to adopt an epicurean attitude. Indeed, within the poem, in books that I know are not often read, there will be Junonian conflict and, furthermore, history tells of outbreaks of violence that threaten to derail the Roman juggernaut (e.g., the Punic Wars, the various civil wars that accompany the dissolution of the Republic). It is of considerable interest to me that though some of us may be of the opinion that we exist in a Jovian universe, our human faculties may perceive a universe that is more Junonian in its effects (i.e., random violence, tragedy, bad things happening to good people, etc.)

### The Character of Aeneas

Virgil's presentation of the character of Aeneas provides another salient example of the way in which Virgil complicates his narrative. Our first view

of Aeneas is of him in tears at the opening of the epic. Assailed on the open sea by a storm sent by Juno, Aeneas in terror exclaims that it would have been better to die at Troy (Knight 30/ Mandelbaum 4). He lacks Stoicism here. Looking on the frieze on Juno's temple (also in book one), Aeneas validates a reader's possible concern with the costs of destiny as he tearfully remarks on the last struggles of Troy depicted there (Knight 41/Mandelbaum 17). The reader who is concerned with the human cost exacted by obedience to teleological assertions of politics is supported in these feeling as he or she looks through the eyes of Aeneas. Later too, he shows the softness of a character from Roman erotic elegy, as he spends much of the book unmindful of his destiny. Mercury catches him, uxorious, both dressed in Tyrian<sup>3</sup> purple and helping Dido build her city:

[Mercury] saw Aeneas engaged on the foundations of the citadel and the construction of new dwellings. He had a sword starred with golden-brown jasper, and wore a cloak of bright Tyrian purple draped from his shoulders... (Knight 105 [cf. Mandelbaum 89])

One might say Aeneas' dalliance with Dido is an epicurean moment in which the demands of fate are ignored and Aeneas does his best to live a happy life in the circumstances that have arisen around him. But as we know fate comes calling and the sensitive Aeneas is progressively left behind as the poem moves forward.

In strong contrast to these moments of sensitivity on the part of the private Aeneas (who would live and love and prefer, perhaps, to count up the kisses he and Dido could share) is the emergence of the public Aeneas. He visits the underworld and sees his father who tells him of the glorious Roman history to come. This, seemingly, changes things. After this book Aeneas is increasingly the man of destiny and the atmospherics around him are altered. The sheer fact of his arrival in someone else's land and his becoming the one to kill the fatherland's greatest warrior (Turnus) makes Aeneas into another Achilles. This impression of him as a double for Troy's greatest enemy is only increased by his lack of restraint on the battlefield as he plays the berserker driven mad by the killing of an ally's young son, Pallas (whom we can associate with Patroclus to a certain extent: Knight 267-269/Mandelbaum 260-263). Also, just as there is human sacrifice at the funeral of Patroclus, so Aeneas performs human sacrifice in honour of Pallas (Knight 281/Mandelbaum 277). Critics have wondered about the violence and implacability of Aeneas in the later parts of the epic and the fact that the emergence of these qualities corresponds to his being more the man of his destiny than he was before.<sup>4</sup> I suspect that this is just the point; empire has its costs and they can be high. What is particularly chilling is how at the end of

<sup>3</sup> By wearing this colour, Aeneas is cutting a Carthaginian figure rather than a proto-Roman one.

<sup>4</sup> See Boyle for a full-dress presentation of the viewpoint that Aeneas loses his humanity over the course of the poem.

book eight, when Aeneas hefts his shield (which has the battle of Actium on it) onto his shoulder, he has not the slightest idea what he is looking at:

Aeneas looked in wonder at the scenes such as these pictured about the shield which Vulcan had made and his mother had given to him. He had no knowledge of the events, but none the less he found pleasure in their representations, as he lifted onto his shoulder the glory and the destiny of his heirs. (Knight 223 [cf. Mandelbaum 214])

Of course, as the representations are of the future, a reader may say, Aeneas is not going to know what they are. This is an easy answer. The question I think to ask is this: does stoic surrender to the demands of fate lead even to the abandoning of any mental distance from what one does? Destiny demands and you, content, don't even think to question representations that, it would appear, mean nothing? Once again it is possible to see Virgil registering the steep costs of empire, costs the cognizance of which should none the less be balanced by recognition that the presence of empire might very well guarantee peace and its fruits.

### The Voice of the Poet

Another way in which Virgil complicates a reader's response is through the existence of the different voices adopted by the poet in the *Aeneid*. There is the public voice that celebrates the coming of empire and is bullish about the good that will result. Jove in book one and Anchises in book six provide characteristic articulations from this voice. The private voice, in contrast, bemoans the costs and the loss of young people (e.g., Creusa, Dido, Camilla, Nisus, Euryalus, Turnus, Pallas, etc.) who pay with their lives to get Aeneas to Italy so he can marry Lavinia and start off the genealogy that will eventually bring the world Rome.<sup>5</sup> Recent years have brought about perception of still a third voice, a voice that reflects on the status of the poem as a work of art. It is a ludic or playful voice and it is often called Alexandrian. It is called Alexandrian in reference to the fact that poetry that displays awareness of its status as poetry began with Greek poets working in Alexandria after Alexander changed the complexion of the eastern Mediterranean with his conquests. The *Aeneid* is not, after all, merely a work of propaganda and neither is it merely an uninterrupted sob; it is also a highly worked piece of art that at times is just playful. See, for example, the description of the battle in book eight between Cacus and Hercules which is both hyperbolic in essence and lacking in moral complexity (the latter quality is quite scandalous when we consider the moral gravity of much of the rest of the poem). The humorous story of baby Camilla strapped to a spear flying across river [Knight 296/Mandelbaum 293]) makes for a similar effect. Or, most puzzlingly to readers wanting the *Aeneid* to stay serious is the recollection of a line from Catullus' translation (*Carmen* 66) of a poem by the Greek poet Callimachus in which a lock of hair announces to the Egyptian Queen, Berenice, that it was unwilling to leave her head; using almost the

<sup>5</sup> Parry provides the classic explication of the two voices in the *Aeneid*.

same words, Aeneas, while in the underworld, tells Dido that he was unwilling to leave her shores (Knight 161/Mandelbaum 147-148). These playful moments and changes in tone underscore the poem's status as a work of art that aspires to be not merely propaganda or a place of tears. In the course of an excellent discussion of the interplay of these three voices, Peter Toohey puts it well:

Just as the conflict between the public and private voices causes us to take stock of the validity of the imperial aim of the poem, so does the Alexandrian voice cause us to establish a distance between the lugubrious moral message of the epic and the simple pleasure of reading. (142)<sup>6</sup>

Aesthetics and the poet's display of poetic virtuosity are an undeniable part of the poem and intrude on and place in context the battle between the other two voices. Careful readers of my words through the whole of this essay will note that my interpretation in general gives somewhat short shift to aesthetics and things Alexandrian. It is surpassingly difficult to keep the ludic/aesthetic/Alexandrian voice integrated into an analysis. Even though this is a problem to think more of, the important message to take from this tripling of voices as far as I am concerned is the fact there are multiple authorial perspectives visible in the poem.

I hope with these brief remarks that I have been able to suggest some of the ways in which the ostensibly clear narrative of the *Aeneid* is rather more complicated than it may first appear. As I mentioned above, I think it offers an excellent opportunity to make students more thoughtful consumers of what they read and indeed to sensitize them to what may be afoot in teleological narratives. Skills acquired in such study of the *Aeneid* are always transferable.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For more on the ludic/Alexandrian voice, see Toohey 1992, 139-142.

<sup>7</sup> My remarks could have been extended to gender too, as there is a decided difference between the expectations of men and women in the epic. Interested readers should investigate Oliensis' remarks (see bibliography).

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