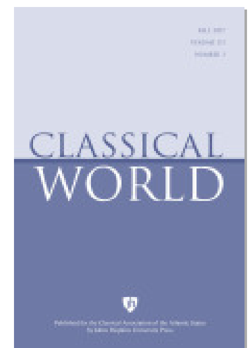
Sowing the Seeds of War: The *Aeneid* 's Prehistory of Interpretive Contestation and Appropriation



Nandini B. Pandey

Classical World, Volume 111, Number 1, Fall 2017, pp. 7-25 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/clw.2017.0062

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/676930

Access provided at 25 Aug 2019 23:52 GMT with no institutional affiliation

Sowing the Seeds of War: The *Aeneid*'s Prehistory of Interpretive Contestation and Appropriation

NANDINI B. PANDEY

ABSTRACT: Long before the Harvard School, the earliest audiences of Vergil's *Aeneid* were conditioned to hear "two voices" in the epic. Vergil's *Eclogues* had already illustrated and evoked dialogic interpretations; the epic's ekphrases, including the Trojan War frieze at Carthage, show the subjective nature of all aesthetic response; and the ancient *vita* tradition framed the text of the *Aeneid*, like Pallas' baldric, as an object of political contestation. In tying the epic's publication to the death of its author, the *Aeneid*'s object history continues to implicate all readers, from Augustus to the designers of the 9/11 Memorial in New York, in a struggle for interpretive control.

About fifty years ago, a group of scholars now known collectively if somewhat arbitrarily as the Harvard School began identifying in the *Aeneid* voices of ambivalence and critique in addition to praise for Augustus and his new regime. This mode of interpretation continues to exert a strong gravitational pull over Vergilian scholarship and crystallized an almost ineluctable binary between "pessimistic" and "optimistic" readings of the *Aeneid*, the former the norm in Anglophone scholarship, the latter still popular on the Continent.[1] Some have questioned whether this debate has been constructive or innovative when viewed over the *longue durée*. Classicists on both sides of the aisle have more in common

This paper stems from a panel on the Harvard School's fiftieth anniversary sponsored by the Vergilian Society at the 2016 Annual Meeting of the Society for Classical Studies in San Francisco. For comments and questions that enriched the argument, I warmly thank panel organizer/editor Julia Hejduk, respondent Jim O'Hara, my fellow panelists and audience members; Shadi Bartsch and other contributors to a lively Academia.edu session; and *CW*'s co-editor Lee Pearcy. Any errors that remain are mine alone.

[1] For an overview, see Harrison 1990a and Schmidt 2001.

Classical World, vol. 111, no. 1 (2017) Pp.7–25

than not in terms of their training, methodologies, bases for evaluating literary arguments, and, often, their interpretations of particular passages. Yet their difference on the ideological and perhaps irresolvable question of Vergil's politics has sharpened into a reductive opposition between "pro-" and "anti-Augustan" camps.[2] Such interpretive division, moreover, has had a long history: "pessimistic" interpretations, far from originating in twentieth-century Massachusetts, have been shown to be almost as old as the poem itself.[3] Dialectic and debate, it seems, have characterized audience responses to the *Aeneid* not only over the past five decades, but ever since it became an instant classic upon Vergil's death in 19 BCE.

It is the goal of this paper, in broad and brief brushstrokes, to trace the *Aeneid*'s susceptibility to interpretive contestation even further back in time, into its prehistory as a canonical text. Conditions that encouraged divergent readings of the epic—including today's falsely binarized "pessimistic" and "optimistic" schools—already surrounded its publication, not to mention its creation and initial reception. Two millennia before the Harvard School, Vergil's first audiences were preconditioned to hear antiphonal notes in his national epic by factors including (1) dialogic strains in Vergil's earlier poems; (2) the *Aeneid*'s internal representations of reception; and (3) its biography as an object, which underscored its vulnerability to ideological appropriation. These same factors bear on a question at the heart of the Vergil debates: who determines the meaning of a text? One charge leveled against the Harvard School is that it imposes modern sensibilities—informed by a twentieth-century Western experience of fascism and colonialism—upon an ancient author who would have found them alien. But it is debatable whether the optimists do a better job of recovering the poet's intentions, or even whether such an endeavor is possible or useful. Vergil himself, I suggest, recognized his fundamental inability to control his poems' meaning and use. Throughout his poetic corpus, we see texts wrested away from their creators and subject to contestation by their readers, just as Vergil's own

---

[2] I employ such terms in quotes as a reminder that they belie the subtlety of Vergil's poems and the best modern scholarship. For this binary, see Kennedy 1992; Sharrock 1994; Davis 1999; Boyle 2003: 55n22. In recent decades, some have re-envisioned Augustan literature as a cultural "discourse" around the *princeps*, though they risk relapsing into the view that art either emanates from or opposes Augustus; see Barchiesi 1997 and Galinsky 1998.

[3] See Thomas 2001 and Kallendorf 2007.

poems will remain battlegrounds for interpretive debate long after the Harvard School's cultural moment has passed.

I. Prelude: Antiphony and Appropriation in the *Eclogues*

In one sense, the *Aeneid* was already destined for dialectical interpretation when it was still just a twinkle in its daddy's eye. Its first readers and auditors brought to it expectations and interpretive patterns conditioned by their exposure to Vergil's earlier works.[4] And already in the *Eclogues* (ca. 39 BCE), Vergil avoids rendering praise and blame directly from his authorial persona, as did some of his predecessors and contemporaries.[5] Instead, he presents current events in shifting and indirect light, most notably the civil-war land confiscations that affected him personally along with many other Italians.[6] The music of the first poem, for instance, stems from the fugue-like counterpoint between the dispossessed Meliboeus' pessimism (1–5) and Tityrus' more optimistic outlook after being spared by Octavian (6–10). The poet's balanced presentation of each side without first-person intervention makes it difficult to identify his own views, much less assign them to a faction. In other words, Vergil was actively constructing "dual voices" and occluding his own politics long before he wrote the *Aeneid*, with its similarly indirect relationship with contemporary events, its tendency to couch praise for Augustus within reported speech,[7] and its portrayal of the negative as well as positive consequences of Julian ascendancy.

Vergil's artful modulation of voices within the *Eclogues* thus becomes both a model for the *Aeneid* and a mirror for the interpretive

[4] Their responses were also conditioned by their education and rhetorical training. For ancient styles of reading, including attention to inconsistency and hidden meaning, see Konstan 2006 and Nünlist 2009. Ahl 1984 suggests such tendencies were amplified under tyranny. For reading, literacy, and book distribution more generally, see Johnson 2000 and Wiseman 2015.

[5] Compare Catullus 29 and 57 on Caesar.

[6] See *Vita Suetonii vulgo Donatiana* (henceforth *Vit. Verg.*) 19, for which I use the text of Ziolkowski and Putnam 2008: 181–99. Since confiscations began in 42 BCE and continued until after Actium, these references do not help narrow down the poem's date. See Coleman 1977: 14–21 for the publication and chronology of these poems, and 274–75 for the ancient inference that Vergil, like Tityrus, was displaced from his lands but saved through Octavian's intervention.

[7] Compare Jupiter's prophecy at 1.286–296, Anchises' praise at 6.789–807, and Vulcan's shield at 8.678–728—all rhetorically motivated within their literary contexts.

debate it would face. Vergil's later conflation with his own simple shepherds may have diminished appreciation for the political balance that he cultivated from the first. According to ancient tradition (*Vit. Verg.* 42), Vergil originally prepended the following biography to his epic:

> ille ego qui quondam gracili modulatus avena
> carmen et egressus silvis vicina coegi
> ut quamvis avido parerent arva colono,
> gratum opus agricolis, at nunc horrentia Martis
> arma virumque cano . . .
>
> (*Aen.* 1.a–d, 1)

> I am the man who once measured out song on slender reed and, leaving the woods, compelled the neighboring fields to obey as they could their eager cultivator, a work pleasing to the farmers; but now, Mars' bristling arms and the man I sing . . . [8]

This proem's authenticity is now widely disputed, but its continued survival within the scholiastic tradition sheds some light on how ancient readers understood Vergil and his poems.[9]

The phrase *gracili modulatus avena* (a) aligns the poet with his own earlier pastoral characters, recalling (for instance) Meliboeus' description of Tityrus as "practicing the woodland muse on [his] slim pipe" (*tenui Musam meditaris avena*, *Ecl.* 1.2). Indeed, ancient readers (Calp. Sic. *Ecl.* 4; Mart. *Ep.* 8.55; Servius at *Ecl.* 1.1) sometimes identified Vergil with the character of Tityrus, as a poetic beneficiary of Augustan patronage (see *Ecl.* 1.9–10: "He has permitted . . . me to play what I wish on this rustic flute"). But even the phrase "what I wish" (*quae vellem*), underscored by analogy with the cows that roam at will (*errare*, 1.9), marks Tityrus' intellectual independence despite his economic debt. And, of course, Vergil counters Tityrus' gratitude with Meliboeus' regret, which sets an elegiac tone for the *Eclogues* (1.1–5). The *Aeneid*'s biographical proem not only recalls Meliboeus' words, but also begins the epic on a similarly wistful note: the poet Vergil, like Meliboeus, has left pastoral peace for "Mars' bristling arms." At the same time, it frames the *Aeneid* as the culmination of a coherent poetic career. Perhaps the

---

[8] All translations are my own.

[9] According to *Vit. Verg.* 42, "the grammarian Nisus used to say that he had heard from older men that Varius . . . emended the beginning of the first book by striking out [these] lines"; see also Theodorakopoulos 1997 and Kayachev 2011.

many voices of the *Eclogues* were practice for the *Aeneid*: not only for the author as he perfected his technique, but also for his readers, as they attuned their ears and expectations to his art.

A close reading of the *Eclogues* themselves makes it difficult to equate Vergil with any one of his characters, much less to extricate joy from sadness, praise from critique, or life from fiction.[10] In *Eclogue* 5.86–87, for example, Menalcas mentions the pipe upon which he learned the songs *formosum Corydon ardebat Alexim* ("Corydon loved handsome Alexis") and *cuium pecus? an Meliboei?* ("Whose flock is this? Meliboeus'?"). These titles quote directly from the incipits of *Eclogues* 2 and 3, otherwise unascribed to a singer, thus enabling identification of Menalcas with the poet himself. But in *Eclogue* 9, two shepherds effectively debate whether to interpret Menalcas' songs optimistically or pessimistically, and the latter side wins out. In their conversation, the shepherds are notably unconcerned with Menalcas' original authorial intent, political leanings, or aesthetic designs. Instead, their divergent experiences of recent events color their responses to the poems, and indeed the question by which they evaluate them: whether songs have any effect on the world.[11] In an amoebaean exchange that recalls *Eclogue* 1, Moeris, like Meliboeus, laments his recent dispossession from his land (2–6). Lycidas, like Tityrus, responds naively in presuming that Menalcas' poems had saved the surrounding countryside from confiscation (7–10). But Moeris replies that this was mere rumor: poems have no more worth in times of war than doves against eagles (11–13). Moreover, he quotes at 27–29 from an unfinished poem of Menalcas that has clearly failed in its goal of preventing land seizures in Mantua, Vergil's hometown. Here, as in *Eclogue* 1, the refugee's pessimistic viewpoint tempers the happy shepherd's voice and problematizes optimistic readings of the poet and his work. This mirrors the alternating structure of the *Eclogues* as a whole, whereby hopeful visions of the future, as in *Eclogue* 4's famous prediction of a Golden Age, stand out all the more brightly (if dubiously) against the melancholy background of the bookending *Eclogues* 1, 9, and 10. This latter poem, with its vision of the poet Gallus' exile from pastoral fantasy into the suffering of love and military service, concludes

[10] Roman reality continually intrudes upon the pastoral fantasy, with, for example, Meliboeus' unfulfilled need for patronage, Gallus' final exile from Arcadia, and the remembrance of Caesar in the coded form of Daphnis. See Connolly 2001.

[11] Lowrie 2009 discusses poetic efficacy with reference to the *Eclogues*.

the book on an elegiac note that must only have darkened in retrospect after the historical Gallus' political disgrace and suicide around 26 BCE.[12] Whatever his momentary similarities with optimistic shepherds like Tityrus, then, Vergil constructed the *Eclogues* as an implicit *argumentum in utramque partem*, giving sympathetic portrayal to both positive and negative views of the same events while preventing easy correlation between poetic fiction and political reality.

A reader of the *Eclogues* would therefore bring to the *Aeneid* an appreciation of Vergil's aesthetics of ambiguity, one that invites compassion for antithetical sides while rendering the poet's own views difficult if not impossible to pin down. Tityrus' salvation by Octavian represents a happy confluence between poetry and power, and provides an early precedent for viewing Vergil's epic as a product of patronage or instrument of propaganda. Then again, this fortunate outcome is duplicated nowhere else in the book and indeed acquires an air of unreality amidst the deepening shadows of *Eclogues* 9 and 10. For that matter, characters like Meliboeus, Moeris, and the real-life Gallus provide a sobering reminder of what happens when the interests, desires, and fortunes of poet and prince conflict. Vergil's polyvocalic shepherds thus prefigure and inform readers' later understanding of the *Aeneid* and its relationship with power.

These pastoral characters also (p)re-enact the process of dialectical reception and appropriation to which Vergil's own works would be subject. Within the wider context of the *Eclogues*, words, symbols, meanings, even authorial intentions prove unstable as the shepherds contest earlier songs and memories. *Eclogue* 9 again provides a good example. Following the manuscripts and many modern editors, I attribute lines 44–45 to Lycidas, introducing a song he once heard from his interlocutor Moeris:[13]

> quid, quae te pura solum sub nocte canentem
> audieram? numeros memini, si verba tenerem:
> "Daphni, quid antiquos signorum suspicis ortus?

[12] On Gallus' poetry and downfall, evidently for self-aggrandizing comportment in Egypt, see Suet. *Aug.* 66; Cass. Dio 53.23; Manzoni 1995; Anderson, Parsons, and Nisbet 1979.

[13] See Mynors' 1969 OCT and Fairclough's 1916 Loeb edition (retained in Goold's 1999 revision). Coleman 1977: 268–69 assigns 44–45 to Moeris in a line distribution not found in the manuscripts, most of which attribute 46–50 to Moeris.

ecce Dionaei processit Caesaris astrum,
astrum quo segetes gauderent frugibus et quo
duceret apricis in collibus uva colorem.
insere, Daphni, piros: carpent tua poma nepotes."

(*Ecl.* 9.44–50)

What about the verses that I once heard you singing alone under a clear night sky? I remember the meter, if I could grasp the words: "Daphnis, why are you looking to old constellations rising? Look, the star of Dionean Caesar has come forth—the star under whose influence the fields may rejoice in their crops and the grape ripen on the sunny hills. Daphnis, graft your pears; your grandsons will pluck the fruit."

This passage revisits *Eclogue* 5's lamentation for the dead Daphnis as a seeming stand-in for Julius Caesar (20–80), instead treating him as one of the Julian star's many mortal beneficiaries.[14] Here, then, we glimpse Vergil reappropriating and reworking elements of his own symbolic vocabulary within the *Eclogues*. But within the poetic fiction of this poem, Lycidas is doing something equally interesting with Moeris' earlier song: he is reading it "optimistically," *with* its author's original intentions, but *against* the more "pessimistic" outlook Moeris has developed in the hindsight of history. As discussed above, Moeris is despondent and disillusioned about the force of poetry given the recent confiscation of his lands (2–6; 11–16). Lycidas tries to remind him of the value of pastoral song by quoting choice excerpts from the past, including Moeris' own earlier poem in praise of Caesar. But this quotation becomes highly ironic in the context of Moeris' current plight as a refugee: Moeris' grandsons, unlike Daphnis' (50), will most emphatically not be able to harvest the pears he planted. His earlier hopes have been betrayed by political reality, and any remaining value this song-snippet has lies in its aesthetic merits rather than its commentary on leadership. No wonder, then, that this increasingly pessimistic pastoral author disavows his earlier, pro-Caesarian song in *Eclogue* 9. Moeris claims not to remember the piece at all at, casting it as the dusty relic of a carefree youth:

omnia fert aetas, animum quoque; saepe ego longos
cantando puerum memini me condere soles:
nunc oblita mihi tot carmina, vox quoque Moerim

[14] The *Caesaris astrum* refers to the *sidus Iulium*, the comet that symbolized Caesar's apotheosis; see Pandey 2013: 423–24.

> iam fugit ipsa: lupi Moerim videre priores.
> sed tamen ista satis referet tibi saepe Menalcas.
>
> (*Ecl.* 9.51–55)

> Time takes away all things, even the mind; often I remember, as a boy, whiling away the long days in singing; now I've forgotten so many songs, and my voice itself flees Moeris; the wolves saw Moeris first. But at least Menalcas will sing these things to you often enough.

At line 55, Moeris effectively disowns the song, dismissively leaving "these things of yours" (*ista*, 55) for the more optimistic Lycidas to enjoy in Moeris' absence as performed by Menalcas.

This scene is one of many that reflect on the dynamics of textual production, reception, and quotation, in keeping with the *Eclogues*' overarching generic concern with selective representation. It shows an author "pessimistically" rereading, even disavowing, his own text in light of later history—even though Lycidas continues to try to read it in its originally "optimistic" way, against the author's actual wishes. It is tempting to see here a proleptic warning against the interpretive battles posthumously waged over the poet's final work. The *Eclogues* raise questions that also resonate deeply for the *Aeneid:* questions about texts' power, permanence, separability from their authors, and dissociation from their original performative and political contexts. The interaction between Moeris and Lycidas, in particular, questions whether, how, and to what extent an author determines the meaning of a text at the time of writing. Could attempts to excavate an artist's original historical intentions, as though frozen in amber, ultimately contradict his aesthetic intentions and political leanings as they might ebb and sway in the stream of history? The Harvard School and its critics remind us that our own interpretations of the *Aeneid* are inevitably filtered through historical and political frames of reference, not least our knowledge of the abuses of later Roman emperors and modern autocracies. But *Eclogue* 9 points out that authors' perspectives, too, might change over time and in hindsight, and it is a disservice to chain them to their intentions at the moment of composition. Perhaps Vergil and his ancient readers intuited that artistic meaning, like Daphnis' grafted pears, might take generations to ripen. And, with the shepherds of Arcadia, they might have viewed with bemusement the concern for original authorial intent that shadows the Harvard-School debate.

II. Ekphrastic Receptions: The Trojan War Frieze at Carthage in *Aeneid* 1

The periodization of Roman history into republican and imperial eras imagined as radically disjunctive has obscured continuities in Vergil's aesthetics. But the *Eclogues*' dialogism and political obliquity are not the only factors that prepared early auditors to hear multiple voices in the *Aeneid*. The epic's much-studied ekphrases, notably Aeneas' encounter with the Trojan War frieze at Carthage (*Aen.* 1.446–493), are themselves internal examples of reception that comment broadly on how audiences interpret texts, whether verbal or visual.[15] These passages also condition readers' responses to the *Aeneid* and prefigure our continuing tendency to interpret it in polarized ways.[16]

Much as the shepherds of the *Eclogues* excerpt and revise songs with little concern for their composers' intentions, Vergil's description of the Carthage frieze zooms in on Aeneas' subjective and selective reaction, without regard for the thoughts of the temple's founder, builders, and worshipers. Readers view the artwork only through Aeneas' eyes as he recognizes images from the war at Troy (453–458) and interprets them as though they are unfolding before him (464–493). Verbs of perception and response (*lustrat,* 453; *miratur,* 456; *videt,* 456; *animum . . . pascit,* 464; *umectat*, 465; *videbat*, 466; *gemitum dat*, 485; *agnovit*, 488) highlight his increasing imaginative participation as he literally sees himself in this scene. For that matter, his Trojan sympathies and historical hindsight palpably color his perspective. Aeneas characterizes Athena as "unfair" (*non aequae*, 479) when she ignores her Trojan suppliants and groans as he sees Achilles "sell Hector's lifeless body for gold" to the unarmed Priam (484–487). This description tendentiously revises the third-person omniscient narration of *Iliad* 24, in which Achilles and Priam show mutual respect during their emotionally charged exchange of Hector's corpse. From his highly invested first-person perspective, however, Aeneas sees only Achilles' ruthlessness and Priam's vulnerability.

---

[15] I follow Vergil in analogizing verbal and visual texts, in keeping with the breadth of the Latin verb *texere*, "to weave, intertwine, construct." For instance, Vergil refers to the shield of Aeneas as a *non enarrabile textum* ("not fully describable artistic surface," 8.625) and uses forms of *legere* (usually, "to read") for Aeneas' visual interpretation of Daedalus' art at *Aen.* 6.34 and the parade of future Romans at 6.755.

[16] Here I build on metaliterary readings of this frieze (or mural) by Williams 1960; Segal 1981; Fowler 1991; Putnam 1998; Bartsch 1998.

Aeneas' partisanship determines not only *how* but also *what* he sees. As commentators have noted, Aeneas' eye dwells on the horses of Rhesus (469–473), the death of Troilus (474–478), and the loss of the Palladium (hinted at in 479–482), all omens concerning the fall of Troy.[17] This suggests that he picks out in retrospect signs that he and the Trojans were unable to comprehend at the time. This strong focalization through Aeneas comments more generally on the personal biases and experiences that affect responses to art. Just as the Carthaginian frieze has no independent existence outside Aeneas' partial perspective as embedded in Vergil's poem, so too does art attain meaning only in and through the historically situated perceptions of its various audiences.

It is striking, too, that Aeneas appears unaware of, and unconcerned with, the biases that inform his interpretation. In his view, the frieze testifies to his city's fame and heralds a sympathetic reception from the Carthaginians:

> "quis iam locus" inquit "Achate,
> quae regio in terris nostri non plena laboris?
> en Priamus! sunt hic etiam sua praemia laudi;
> sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.
> solve metus; feret haec aliquam tibi fama salutem."
> (*Aen.* 1.459–463)

> "What place," he said, "Achates, what region of the earth is not now full of our trouble? Look, here's Priam! Even here there are rewards for honor; there are tears for things and mortal affairs touch the mind. Let go your fear; this renown will bring you some safety."

Some have characterized this response as naive, given the frieze's location on a temple to Juno,[18] where it would seem to signify the goddess' implacable fury against the Trojans rather than any pity for mortal suffering. But it should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with Greco-Roman art that a frieze honoring Juno might permit multiple interpretations, including sympathy for her victims. From the Gigantomachy on the Pergamon Altar to the statue of the Dying Gaul, ancient art tends to depict the pathos of the defeated as a necessary corollary to the

[17] See Williams 1972 and Ganiban et al. 2012.

[18] See Boyle 1972: 74–75; Johnson 1976: 104–105; DuBois 1982. Bartsch 1998: 337–38 similarly cites and rejects such views.

glory of victory.[19] In other words, Aeneas' performance of a pro-Trojan reading of the frieze despite its theoretically anti-Trojan architectural context cannot be characterized as incorrect. Rather, it symbolizes art's fundamental openness to interpretation, as well as the human tendency to insert oneself into a text, sometimes contrary to its author's intentions.

For that matter, Aeneas' reading is proven correct within its literary context. As readers know, Jupiter has already softened the hearts of Dido and her people toward the Trojans (1.297–304). And true to Aeneas' hopes, Dido confirms the Trojans' fame and welcomes them to Carthage (1.615–630). The goodwill between their people sours only after another ambiguously interpretable scene: the "marriage" in the cave (4.160–172) so hotly debated by Dido, Aeneas, and Vergil's readers since antiquity.[20] With the blessing of Juno and the treacherous consent of Venus, Dido calls her relationship with Aeneas "wedlock, veiling her fault under this name" (*coniugium vocat, hoc praetexit nomine culpam*, 4.172). But the poet depicts her with more sympathy than the plotline warrants and shows how expedience and obligation warp Aeneas' own rhetorical portrayal of events. Much as Aeneas could not but read the Trojan War frieze in light of his loyalties, Roman readers could not arbitrate between Dido's and Aeneas' competing claims without imposing their own implicit biases. These were informed by the Punic Wars that resulted from Aeneas' perceived betrayal (4.622–629), ironically reenacting in reverse the conflict of continents at Troy. In this and many other instances, the *Aeneid* makes it difficult to label particular interpretations as "correct," instead portraying them as self-interested, historically conditioned, and open to debate even as they go on to shape real belief and action.[21]

The frieze thus comes to allegorize the *Aeneid*'s own susceptibility to partisan reading in both its day and ours. In *Georgics* 3.16 (ca. 29 BCE), Vergil imagined himself building a temple to Augustus, often understood as a metaliterary symbol for the *Aeneid* in its conceptual stage.[22]

---

[19] See Hölscher 1987: 23–37 on Hellenistic pathos in art and its Roman reception.

[20] Ovid claims at *Tr.* 2.535–536 that no other episode of the *Aeneid* was more read, giving further sympathetic voice to Dido in *Heroides* 7. For this episode's long reception history, see Thomas 2001.

[21] See the Sinon episode, well analyzed by Hexter 1990, and the Trojans' various misinterpretations of omens in *Aen.* 3 and elsewhere, for which see O'Hara 1990.

[22] Mynors 1990: 181 speculates that the ekphrasis at *Georgics* 3.16–39 envisions an "epic on Caesar with backward glances towards Troy, rather than the historical poem V[ergil] afterwards wrote, with its forward glances towards Caesar."

It is an apt one: as we read the epic, we occupy an analogous position, with similar interpretive latitude, to Aeneas viewing the temple of Juno. Some audiences rightly view the *Aeneid* as a monument to the Augustan achievement; indeed, political circumstances, pragmatic constraints, and Vergil's professional career necessitated that this interpretation be readily available.[23] But Aeneas himself provides good precedent for performing a "pessimistic," victim-centered reading of the epic, whatever Augustus' motivating role. The meaning that we take from the *Aeneid*, like the one Aeneas constructs upon the Carthaginian frieze, depends more on our own emotional stance toward its content than on Vergil's.

III. Two Object Histories: Pallas' Belt and Vergil's Book

The *Aeneid*'s polarized reception history may find its best emblem in another, more controversial, internal act of (mis)reading: the glimpse of Pallas' belt that triggers Aeneas' remembering rage against Turnus (12.945–949). Unlike the ekphrasis from book 1, this is not an extended act of visual interpretation focalized through Aeneas. Rather, the point is that none of the protagonists look at this object carefully, much less absorb its message. In *Aeneid* 10, Vergil describes the belt after Turnus strips it from Pallas' body:

> et laevo pressit pede talia fatus
> exanimem rapiens immania pondera baltei
> impressumque nefas: una sub nocte iugali
> caesa manus iuvenum foede thalamique cruenti,
> quae Clonus Eurytides multo caelaverat auro;
> quo nunc Turnus ovat spolio gaudetque potitus.
> nescia mens hominum fati sortisque futurae
> et servare modum rebus sublata secundis!
> Turno tempus erit magno cum optaverit emptum
> intactum Pallanta, et cum spolia ista diemque
> oderit.
>
> (*Aen.* 10.495–505)

> And having said these things, he pressed the lifeless body with his left foot, snatching the terrible weight of his baldric and the graven crime: the band of young men murdered on the same wedding night and the bedchambers bloody with slaughter, which Clonus son of Eurytides

[23] Powell 2008 exemplifies this realpolitik approach to Vergil.

> chased with much gold; now, having obtained it, Turnus exults in this spoil and rejoices to possess it. The mind of men, unknowing of fate and future chance and how to preserve moderation, when exalted by happy fortune! The time will come when Turnus would have paid a great deal to have left Pallas unharmed, and when he'll hate those spoils along with that day.

This baldric depicts the tragic intergenerational consequences of the feud between Danaus and his brother Aegyptus, ruler of Egypt.[24] In standard versions of the myth, Aegyptus tried to force a marriage between his fifty sons and Danaus' fifty daughters. Danaus fled with his daughters to Argos, but after being pursued there by Aegyptus, he finally consented to the union. However, he ordered his daughters to murder their cousins on their wedding night, and all obeyed—with the exception of Hypermnestra. The others incurred the eternal punishment of bearing water in leaky jars on their heads in Tartarus.[25]

The Danaids were depicted in this latter posture in the portico of Augustus' monumental home and temple complex on the Palatine (28 BCE), suggesting a number of interpretations in light of the recent civil wars. Depending on one's perspective, the statues might refer to the conquest of Egypt, the consequences of vengeance, the guilt of kin murder, or the need for catharsis through labor.[26] Pallas' belt, as described by Vergil, responds by shifting focus from the Danaids to the murdered sons of Aegyptus ("the band of young men murdered on the same wedding night," 497–498). It calls immediate visual attention to the suffering of innocent young men who are drawn into their parents' conflicts, a theme that readily applies to Pallas himself. But the belt's wider mythological context also frames vengeance as a politically and ethically destructive choice despite its momentary attraction. The

---

[24] For further discussion of this passage and its Iliadic intertext, see Putnam 1965: 199; Putnam 1998; Conte 1986: 188; Spence 1991; Strocka 2008; Shelfer 2010; Smith 2005: 174.

[25] Literary sources include Aesch., *Supp.*; Hor. *Odes* 3.11; Ovid, *Her.* 14. For visual depictions and discussion, see Keuls 1986 and Keuls 1974.

[26] In recent decades, the Danaids of the portico have been identified with red and black herms found on the Palatine, their arm-stubs evidently angled to carry a burden. A nearby statue may have depicted their father Danaus with drawn sword (Ovid, *Ars Am.* 1.74; *Tr.* 3.1.62; Prop. 2.31.4) and they were arranged among columns of Numidian *giallo antico* (Vell. 2.81.3, Suet. *Aug.* 29, Cass. Dio 53.1.3). See Tomei 1990, Tomei 2005, Quenemoen 2006, and my forthcoming book with Cambridge University Press.

Danaids certainly suffer for it in the long run despite their obedience to paternal command. Hypermnestra, on the other hand, finds lasting love and goes on to found an Argive dynasty by choosing mercy toward her new husband.

These lessons are, of course, highly relevant to Turnus and Aeneas as they conduct their own miniature civil war for Lavinia and Latium.[27] But Turnus patently fails to perceive the Danaid belt's message or its future role in his doom, as Vergil highlights through heavy foreshadowing (503–505). By killing the young Pallas and despoiling his corpse, Turnus is reenacting the "graven crime" depicted on the belt; he will also, like the Danaids, pay dearly for this apparent victory. Indeed, at the end of the epic, the tables have turned and the defeated Turnus supplicates Aeneas (12.930–938). Moved by his speech, Aeneas contemplates sparing his adversary (12.938–941). But just as Pallas' belt depicts the Aegyptids' murder rather than Hypermnestra's mercy, so too will clemency remain a road not taken by Aeneas, an example not inscribed in the epic's denouement. A glimpse of the baldric, a "reminder of savage grief" (*saevi monimenta doloris*, 945), kindles Aeneas with rage (*ira*, 946) and prompts him to execute Turnus in Pallas' name (945–952).[28] Beyond the edges of the text, he surely repeats and reverses Turnus' act, stripping the baldric back from his enemy's corpse.

In effect, then, the epic ends with a failure of interpretation and an act of reappropriation that prove symbolic of its own future reception. Aeneas' climactic reaction to the *balteus* is strikingly similar to Turnus' in treating the belt as an object of exchange rather than a means of artistic communication or even an accoutrement of war. Like his adversary, Aeneas appears blind to the visual text's narrative content and ethical relevance to his own situation. Rather than interpret the belt as a speaking picture, an artistic "memorial of the savage grief" (*saevi monimenta doloris*, 945) that plagued Danaus, Aegyptus, and their hundred children, Aeneas treats it only as a reminder of his personal grief over Pallas—and, ironically, as a prompt to the same vengeful violence that the

[27] For Vergil's naturalization of Italian unity, which frames the fighting of *Aeneid* 7–12 as a kind of civil war, see Pogorzelski 2009.

[28] This puts Aeneas into the position of his divine adversary Juno, whose "remembering rage" (*memorem . . . iram*, *Aen.* 1.4) against the Trojans drove much of the plot; see Putnam 1995: 293–94. Aeneas' increasing resemblance to his enemies, especially Achilles, is an important theme of Harvard-School criticism; see Anderson 1957 and Otis 1964, 242–49.

Danaids committed. In its immediate plot context, then, the belt vividly illustrates how audiences may ignore a text's message and its maker's intentions (here, unusually, even individuated with the name *Clonus Eurytides*, 499) and instead impose a wholly separate emotional meaning upon it as a symbolic object of strife. Aeneas' ultimate act of revenge occupies the narrative position where one might expect an ekphrasis of the belt, and indeed, it both reenacts the act of violence there engraved and replicates Turnus' ill-fated despoliation of Pallas. In this last act of the epic, then, Aeneas' eagerness to assert ownership over the belt prevents him from perceiving its message and dooms him to repeat its lessons.

Pallas' belt illustrates how a text's biography as an object—its material history of possession, exchange, and reappropriation—can eclipse its communicative capacity in the eyes of some audiences. In an uncanny way, moreover, this episode prefigures Vergil's and Augustus' struggles over the fate of the *Aeneid* as reported in various accounts of the poet's life.[29] One of the fullest of these (*Vit. Verg.* 35–41) relates that in his fifty-second year, Vergil determined to spend three years in the Greek East putting the final touches on the *Aeneid*. But early in the trip, when he arrived at Athens, he encountered Augustus, fell mysteriously ill, and aborted his trip, returning to Italy with the emperor. Before embarking on his voyage, Vergil had asked Varius to destroy the *Aeneid* in case anything happened to him; now, as he lay dying in Brundisium, he begged for his scrolls so he could burn them himself. But nobody brought them, and after his death, and against his last wishes, Varius published the work with only minor emendations at Augustus' command: *auctore Augusto* (41).

Others have analyzed this story's history far more thoroughly than I can here.[30] But I suggest that, whatever its origin, the legend constructs the *Aeneid* as fundamentally subject to contestation, even as a precondition to its physical survival. The textual birth of the *Aeneid* was causally and temporally inseparable from the death of its author: the epic exists for us today only because of an originary act of violence against

---

[29] Ziolkowski and Putnam 2008: 420–25 compile sources beginning with Ovid's apparent references to the story in *Tr.* 1.1.117–22 and elsewhere. See also Pliny *HN* 7.114; fragments of a second-century poem on the event; Aulus Gellius *NA* 17.10.5–7; *Vit. Verg.* 39, Macrobius *Sat.* 1.24.6; and late-medieval and Renaissance commentators, with analysis by Brugnoli and Stok 2006 and Stok 2010.

[30] See Krevans 2010 and O'Hara 2010. Broch 1945 meditates on this scene.

Vergil's authorial intentions by that paradigmatically "pro-Augustan" reader, Augustus himself.[31] For that matter, the story informed posthumous perceptions of Vergil, paratextually colored interpretations of his work, provides an apt aetiology for the interpretive conflicts that still surround the *Aeneid*, and continues to place readers in a compromised subject position.

The story of the *Aeneid*'s publication, in pitting Vergil's authorial intentions against Augustus' overriding *auctoritas*, paradoxically ballasts both "pro-" and "anti-Augustan" readings of the text. The fact that Augustus took an active interest in the epic and commanded its posthumous publication suggests that he understood its value as a work of art and a testament to his reign—that is, its "pro-Augustan" potential.[32] Personally, he may well have perceived, even appreciated, its moments of melancholy and ambivalence; but his role in circulating the work encouraged audiences to read it as aligned with imperial interests and thus to downplay or explain away its more pessimistic notes (as so often in Servius). The Donatan *Vita*'s implicit transference of "authorship" from Vergil to Augustus (*auctore Augusto*, 41) thus underlines the material role that Augustus took in the *Aeneid*'s entrance into the world as well as the central part he has played in its reception.

Vergil's resistance to publication is more difficult to interpret. His deathbed desire to destroy the *Aeneid* has been ascribed to modesty (*verecundiam*, Plin. *HN* 7.114) stemming from the poem's supposed incompletion.[33] It is for this very reason that Ovid claims to have consigned his own epic to the flames when he went into exile in 8 CE (*Tr.* 1.7.11–22). But Ovid undercuts his own Vergilian mime when he adds that the *Metamorphoses* had already been copied and is now being read in Rome without final authorial edits (*Tr.* 1.7.22–30; *Tr.* 3.14.21–24). Vergil, too, had already circulated parts of his epic publicly through recitations for the imperial family and larger audiences (*Vit. Verg.* 32–34), and Varius surely retained a copy for safekeeping when the poet left Italy (see *Vit. Verg.* 39–40). The likelihood that Vergil's was not the sole copy of the *Aeneid*, the poet's recognized skill as a performer, and his

[31] This paper is informed by Barthes 1977 on the death of the author and by reader-response theory in general.

[32] *Vit. Verg.* 31 quotes verbatim a mock-threatening letter from Augustus to Vergil demanding his first sketch of the *Aeneid*.

[33] For fuller discussion with sources, see Stok 2010: 110–12.

willingness to make public trial of imperfect lines (for example, at *Vit. Verg.* 33–44) seem hard to square with the idea that perfectionism or shyness genuinely motivated his dying wish.

From a pessimistic perspective, however, the poet's attempt to burn his book might suggest that he foresaw and attempted to forestall its cooptation for pro-Augustan political purposes. A quarter century later, Ovid refers to Vergil, in an address to Augustus, as "the fortunate author of *your Aeneid*" (*et tamen ille* tuae *felix Aeneidos auctor, Tr.* 2.533; emphasis mine). The second-person possessive adjective *tuae* separates Vergil from his work and transfers ownership to Augustus in a grammatical twist that mirrors the epic's own posthumous appropriation. Moreover, in describing Vergil as *ille . . . felix,* Ovid hints at the fame, fortune, and favor Vergil received, whether or not he calculated or desired it, in exchange for his services to the regime. Ovid's phrase is, of course, rhetorically motivated: it draws an invidious contrast between Vergil's Tityrean felicity and Ovid's exile for his poetic failure to toe the Augustan line.[34] But it also speaks to a perceived alignment between Vergil's poetic project and Augustus' interests, a feeling that the *Aeneid*, and by extension Vergil, in some way belonged to Augustus.[35] It may be precisely this impression that Vergil's last act was intended to preclude. Vergil surely knew that Augustus was eager to see the *Aeneid* published and able to override the poet's feeble efforts to restrict its circulation. At the same time, the poet was painfully aware of his own fame (*Vit. Verg.* 11) and the power of rumor (*Aen.* 4.173–197). Perhaps, then, the attempted deathbed burning was a histrionic gesture in the true sense of the word, designed not to succeed but to send a message: that Vergil was no hired propagandist, but rather asserted authorial independence to the end. The *Aeneid* belonged to Augustus quite literally over the poet's dead body.

The story of the *Aeneid*'s extraction from the flames not only adds further kindling to the Harvard-School debates; it also implicates all readers in a subtextual tug-of-war between poet and *princeps*. While many of us want to throw our weight toward the artist, we implicitly side with Augustus just by virtue of having, and having read, Vergil's

---

[34] Ovid ascribes his punishment to "a poem and a mistake" (*carmen et error*, *Tr.* 2.207) and suggests that the *Ars Amatoria* has been wrongly interpreted as an aid to adultery (2.207–208, 211–213) in opposition to Augustus' moral reforms.

[35] For Ovid's retroactive construction of the *Aeneid* as "pro-Augustan" in contrast to his own more subversive works, see Pandey 2013: 437–46.

reluctant text. If we take the *Aeneid*'s object biography seriously, even as a fictional paratext that influenced its reception, then the epic survived only because Augustus, like Turnus, stripped it from its author's corpse. In this case, even the pessimists are merely plundering it back, repeating like Aeneas the very crime they seek to correct. And we run a similar danger of treating the *Aeneid*, like Pallas' belt, as a symbolic prize rather than a speaking text. Fifty years on, do we continue to wage the Harvard-School debates in order to attain ever more sensitive interpretations of Vergil's epic? Or rather, to lay ideological claim to the poet and his work, impressing them into service on our various sides of the culture wars?

Beyond the narrow lecterns of professional classicists, for that matter, modern audiences continue to reappropriate Vergil's text for personal and political reasons. A case in point is the *Aeneid* quotation on the National September 11 Memorial in New York: "No day shall erase you from the memory of time." This 60-foot-long inscription, in 15-inch letters forged from the mangled steel of the fallen Twin Towers, represents a translation of Vergil's words on the deaths of Nisus and Euryalus: *nulla dies umquam memori vos eximet aevo* (*Aen.* 9.447). Many viewers will locate the inscription's meaning in the troubled material history of the steel itself rather than the letters that give it shape. And the prominent authorial ascription lends it a venerability that, as much as its content, helps dignify the United States' side of a cultural conflict that has been playing out since the Trojan War. But in their original literary context, these words derive from one of the poet's rare personal interventions in his narrative: here, to promise the dead lovers immortality "if my songs can accomplish anything" (*si quid mea carmina possunt*, 9.446). This vow delimits and defends the poet's private voice: it reminds us that his heart, and ultimately his poetic powers, operate independently of the political processes and grand historical narratives that exalt leaders like Aeneas and Augustus. The recycling of this intensely personal utterance into the 9/11 monument highlights both the immortality of the poet's words and his inability to control their usage. The irony deepens when we consider that Vergil's words honor two Near Eastern men who died on a suicidal mission against defenseless Westerners asleep on their own home turf.[36] In a reversal that typifies Vergilian reception, the 9/11 vic-

[36] As others have pointed out; see Alexander 2011 on the circumstantial inappropriateness of *fortunati ambo* and Dunlap 2014 for brief commentary by select scholars.

tims are thus immortalized in words more apt for their killers, words that affirm America's own remembering rage on the geopolitical stage despite Vergil's obvious sympathy for the victims of cultural imperialism.

Whether or not the September 11 Memorial Foundation considered this context, they were certainly embarrassed by the scholarly uproar that ensued. In response to my request for an image to accompany this article, I was asked to submit a draft and denied permission unless I presented the monument in a more favorable light.[37] Their refusal illustrates my point even better than the image could. It shows how tightly audiences cling to their own partisan readings of the *Aeneid*, in disregard of the poet's own recognition that his words could never fully be possessed or disambiguated. The controversy surrounding the 9/11 monument thus encapsulates and perpetuates the process of appropriative contestation with which the *Aeneid* itself is deeply concerned, which greeted the epic before and after its publication, and which will continue to render it not a possession for all time, but rather, a debate for every age.

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN–MADISON
nandini.pandey@wisc.edu

[37] In an email dated August 30, 2016, rights and reproductions manager Amanda Granek requested edits to present a "more balanced" view.