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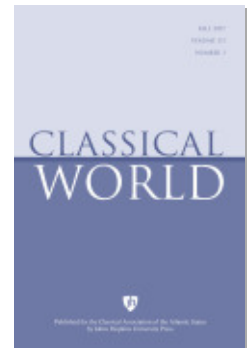
Optimism and the Pessimism of the Harvard School:
Contrasting Perspectives

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the luck of knowing personally; both their published works and their conversation have had the greatest influence on me.

UNIVERSITY OF ROME "TOR VERGATA"

Optimism and the Pessimism of the Harvard School: Contrasting Perspectives

RAYMOND J. CLARK

My very first lecture as an undergraduate and my earliest introduction to Vergil came from the Vergilian scholar and very eccentric man W. F. Jackson Knight in 1960. He wore white gloves, a bow tie, and a monocle clenched in one eye from which a grand loop of a chain hung from his waistcoat pocket. He had already written his Penguin translation of the *Aeneid* and before that his *Roman Vergil*—he told me in six weeks in total—some of it in the summer of 1939 when he was expecting military appointment, the rest in the ensuing winter.¹ The range of his book on Vergil is immense and his chapters on “Tradition and Poetry,” “Form and Reality,” and “Language, Verse, and Style” are famous for his focus on how Vergil’s mind worked, fusing and blending past poetry by a poetic process of integration. In the third of these chapters, Jackson Knight (known to his students as JK) focused upon the semantic penumbrae of individual Vergilian words and phrases and whole passages. He showed how Vergil worked to give new meaning to inherited poetry. Today it is called intertextual criticism. In lectures he compared Vergil’s art to the sorcerer’s refrain in the story of Aladdin’s lamp, “new lamps for old, new lamps for old!” His point was that Vergil really could, by the mere hint of a word or a phrase, turn old poetry into new and imbue age-old traditions with new meaning.

Jackson Knight preceded this by demonstrating the same poetic process of integration and fusion in respect to traditions, detailing the layers of thought and emotion that went into, for instance, Vergil’s creation of

¹ For the date and circumstance, see Jackson Knight 1966: 9.

the tragedy of Dido's love (1966: 125–31). He saw Vergil's manner of integrating themes in the grand structure as a process of alternation and reconciliation between conflicting forces. But in the *Georgics*, reconciliation was not quickly reached, as Vergil had to take account of conflicts in the form of wars and plagues and was ready "to face the tragic vision, and take the tragic way" (152). In the *Aeneid*, too, the Roman world "had to grow to the universe of human suffering and human hope" (153). The fall of Troy in the second book is a tragedy of a world, and of war. But then Venus appears, and her star (2.694), bringing hope out of horror. The tragedy that befalls Dido is a tragedy of an individual and love, leaving a solution "less of hope than despair" (172). Nevertheless, Jackson Knight warned against what he saw as the danger of taking the small things as mattering more, and of regarding the grand structure as of no use at all unless words and phrases (to which he should have added events) are all perfect poetry (149). *Roman Vergil*, as we have seen, was written in the throes of World War II. Jackson Knight saw the collapse of civilization as the predominant obsession in Vergil's day, and he endorsed the view that Vergil was hopeful for humanity (165): eventually a new world is born, the Julian family emerges from the darkness, and Turnus passes into the shadow (224).

Roman Vergil made Jackson Knight a prominent figure in British culture, and he was instrumental in the foundation of the British Virgil Society, which he thought "might be made to link Vergil to the growing problems of the modern world." He shared the thought that in war-torn Europe Vergil may have a message for the modern world: the poet of war with a vision for peace. He was offered the first presidency and accepted, but on condition that the poet T. S. Eliot (who had approved the publication of his book for Faber and Faber, where it was published in 1944) took it first—in deference, as his brother G. Wilson Knight tells us in his biography,² to the fact that "Eliot was already a figure of renown in the literary world." And so in 1944 Eliot gave the first presidential address of the new Society, entitled "What Is a Classic?"

And then, in 1976, I read *Darkness Visible* by W. R. Johnson, written from a contrasting perspective, one which sought to redress the optimism attributed to Vergil by investigating the dark side of the *Aeneid*. It made an

² See G. Wilson Knight 1975: 267–79 for Eliot's approval of Jackson Knight's book and the latter's deference to Eliot, and for full details on the foundation of the Virgil Society and Jackson Knight's role. The whole period is summarized and assessed with great sensitivity by Ziolkowski 1993, 129–33, "Virgil in Britain."

immediate and lasting impression upon me, but not until 2001 did I take up my pen concerning it. In that year I was asked to contribute the only classical paper in a cross-cultural conference on “The Moment of Death.” I thought of Vergil’s masterful description of Dido’s precise moment of death and its treatment in exquisite detail in Johnson’s book. I was intrigued by Johnson’s close analysis of Dido’s difficult death (4.688–705), where “three times she tried to raise her eyes and with roaming eyes looked to high heaven for the light, and found it, and groaned” (*ingemuit*, 692).

As Dido was destroyed neither by destiny nor by a deserved death,³ but tragically before her time, her struggling spirit could find no release. In these circumstances Juno orders Iris to perform a final ritual, so that Dido’s trapped soul can depart. Iris leaves a trail of colors as she descends from the sky, and while hovering over Dido’s head she speaks and performs her ritual act (4.702–704):⁴

“So commanded,
I take this lock as offering to Dis;
I free you from your body.” So she speaks
and cuts the lock (*crinem secat*) with her right hand; at once
the warmth was gone, the life passed to the winds.

Johnson brilliantly formulates inherent complexities in a series of questions: “Is Dido aware that Iris has come? Does she hear the words that we hear? Is it possible that Dido sees the rainbow that we see and hears the death formula as we hear it?” He observes that Dido’s “groan” in 692 is a perfectly accurate metaphor for dying. “Yet,” he says, “she does not, or does not seem to, die at this moment. She dies when Iris, having descended in glory, has spoken the death formula and snipped off the gold lock of hair.” This moment of death, he suggests, is “all but simultaneous” with her groan in 692: “In short, we see Dido’s death as she ‘sees’ it, the fatal ritual utterance of Iris, the death blow (*crinem secat*), the groan” (67).

With all of this I concur, but not with the further conclusion that the division of one instant into two is “baffling,” with “the curious effect of

³ Johnson 1976: 68 points out that this judgment comes from Juno, whose intervention by sending down Iris he claims leads by a combined manipulation of pathos and deceitful confusion of narrators to “a strangely disturbing fraudulence about [Dido’s] gentle demise” (72). But Vergil as omniscient narrator frequently enters into the minds of others, challenging us to think our own thoughts, here for a purpose explained below.

⁴ Translation by Johnson 1976: 66–67.

removing us from Dido even while we remain with her” (67). Why, then, did Vergil write it? To my mind the dissection of Dido’s moment of death into two is a wonderfully elaborate instance of “theme and variation,” the stylistic device Vergil employs whenever he wishes to compare or expose multiple aspects of a single event or scene. He employs it here not to remove us from Dido, but to entwine “Anna’s vision of Dido’s struggle up to the moment her soul leaves her body with a groan, with events behind the scene invisible to Anna’s mortal eyes but glimpsed by Dido at her last breath.”⁵ At her moment of death she who doubted that the world is influenced by supernatural agencies (4.376–80) looks (with the reader) beyond what is manifest to the eyes and ears of other onlookers and glimpses for the first time in her life the inner workings of the cosmos. In that moment she realizes all too late that deities do let mortal affairs disturb their calm (Clark 2007: 272). The final moment of Dido serves, surely, as Vergil’s commentary on her earlier doubt. She was not just the unplanned casualty of the divine struggle over the destiny of Rome: she espoused the wrong cause and was on the wrong side of destiny.

The political reality of Rome’s expanding empire was not of Vergil’s creation, but was his to explain, which he does in terms of a transcendental cosmic will that can simultaneously result in the mindless destruction and waste of people who brush up against it. Vergil’s universe is first and foremost imperialist, and rational only for those who are on the right side of destiny. What I think Johnson brings to the fore in the most acute form is the distasteful degree of reveling in evil by what he calls “ministers of darkness,” whom he identifies with Iris, Cupid, Juno and others, and the perspective that Vergil’s theodicy is less stable than many readers have read into the poet’s final design, leaving us with “no calm and not much hope” (148).

Despite the Cumaean prophecy of a Golden Age, I see Vergil as a political realist for whom the real world was brought about by Prometheus’ great cosmic blunder, in which there is *labor improbus*, toil that is unrelenting. Life in the *Aeneid* is a process that contains optimism even if as a narrator Vergil generates dark narrative threads, including the finale, which itself is a process to a new beginning in which Juno (albeit in a ritually problematic manner)⁶ has just sealed her agreement with

⁵ Clark 2007: 271. I have substituted “groan” for “sigh” to reflect Johnson’s translation of *ingemuit*.

⁶ Observed by Panoussi 2009: 101 and 224.

Jupiter's ideological program for the blended new nation of Rome. This, it seems to me, is part of the grand structure. Among the dark threads often involving intertext, ambiguity, religion, and competing narrative points of view, several in recent times have been interpreted in ways that give rise to a major changed perspective from the past, which saw Vergil as wholeheartedly endorsing the Augustan regime.¹ The revision of this view by adherents to the Harvard School forces all Vergilian scholars to take a position on how they think the *Aeneid* should be read.

UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA

Harvard Classics and the Harvard School

JAMES J. CLAUSS

To mere mortals, like an undergraduate classics major from the University of Scranton in 1974, Harvard was big time, the Broadway of American *Altertumswissenschaft*. Though I had had years of Latin and Greek, thanks to the Jesuits, my application to grad school there got no traction, sad to say. Yet after an M.A. from Fordham and Ph.D. from Berkeley, the door toward stardom opened momentarily, as I was interviewed for a three-year position beginning in 1983, Richard Thomas's position in fact, who was headed off for a short run at the University of Cincinnati before returning to the footlights in Cambridge. There were some two-dozen intimidating *altertumswissenschaftliche* interviewers in the room, one of them staring at his shoes the entire time, and a terrified Scrantonian. Although I did not get the position, I enjoyed the interview by virtue of surviving it with my ego and self-confidence somehow still intact (I overheard one of them say, "I think he likes us!").

While I missed the opportunity to encounter the Harvard School in person on its home turf, I did get to know Wendell Clausen when he was the Sather Lecturer at Berkeley; his topic was Vergil and the Hellenistic tradition, a perfect combination for me both then and now.

¹ On this point explicitly, see Thomas 2001.