



PROJECT MUSE®

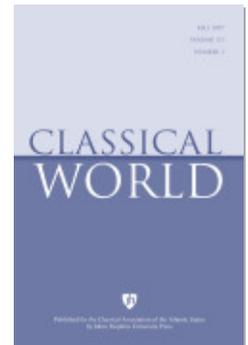
The Conversation of Gentlemen

Richard Jenkyns

Classical World, Volume 111, Number 1, Fall 2017, pp. 79-83 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/clw.2017.0072>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/676940>

Literature" (1857):⁶ "Over the whole of the great poem of Virgil, over the whole *Aeneid*, there rests an ineffable melancholy; not a rigid, a moody gloom, like the melancholy of Lucretius; no, a sweet, a touching sadness, but still a sadness, a melancholy which is at once a source of charm in the poem, and a testimony to its incompleteness." This view may originate in John Keble's Oxford lectures on poetry (1831–41), certainly known to Arnold, where Keble talks of Vergil's "sorrow and sympathy for wretched and weak mortals";⁷ its most notable expression is in Tennyson's well-known poem "To Virgil," written for the poet's 1900th death day in 1882, especially the famous lines "Thou majestic in thy sadness / at the doubtful doom of human kind."

In sum, then, over the last four decades I have learned much from the Harvard School about the complexities of the *Aeneid*, and am now much more aware of its contemporary context and intellectual history.

OXFORD UNIVERSITY

The Conversation of Gentlemen

RICHARD JENKYNs

Rereading Adam Parry's essay (1963) on "The Two Voices," I am struck by how deliberately it presents itself as an essay in belles lettres. There are no footnotes, not even line references. The first pages are the most brilliant. Parry takes a fragment from the ordinary texture of the *Aeneid*, less than two lines in the Italian catalogue, and submits them to a close reading out of which he develops an idea of the character of the whole. This is practical criticism at its best, with a sense of both the particular and the general, showing how a fine sense of detail can enhance a larger understanding.

There is another way in which the essay is old-fashioned (a term which I mean to carry no disparagement), and that is in the plangent eloquence of its prose, matching its Tennysonian idea of a poet majestic in

⁶ Arnold 1970: 74.

⁷ Keble 1912: 2.267 (later English translation; original versions in Latin).

his sadness at the doubtful doom of humankind. The tone is in striking contrast to Parry's other most famous article, "Have We Homer's *Iliad*?" (1966). There the answer is clear-cut: "Yes, absolutely." The difference between this and the half-light of the Virgil essay is partly because the two articles have different jobs to carry out: with Homer Parry is investigating a question of historical fact, with Virgil searching for a sensibility. But perhaps the difference between the character of the two epics has something to do with it too.

Parry did not claim that "the continual opposition of a personal voice" was an original idea. On the contrary, "all this I think is felt by every attentive reader of the poem." He seems to see himself less as staking out a controversial position than as exploring how a quality in the poem—which he claims we all recognize—comes to achieve its peculiar effect. But at times I find it hard to understand exactly what he is saying. Is this because of the subtlety of his mind (and the subtlety of Virgil's too, of course)? Or is that he has not thought all his ideas through fully? A bit of both, perhaps. In distinguishing between a "public voice" and a "personal voice," he seems to imply that the latter is the true voice. Is that indeed what he meant? Are the two voices in counterpoint or in conflict? One might think of Virgil as possessing a single voice that speaks in varied tones. Would that be another way of making Parry's point, or does he see the poem as more radically fractured?

In dealing with Aeneas and Dido, Parry does seem to me contradictory. He rightly denies that Aeneas is a cad who ratted on the girl he picked up on his Tunisian break, but then he appears to come back to more or less that position. Perhaps his most fascinating idea is that Virgil aestheticizes sorrow (a subject to which he would return in his essay on the fourth book of the *Georgics* [1972]). But here too I am not quite sure what he means. Parry says that Virgil invites us to look upon history with "the purer emotions of artistic detachment," which provide a "higher consolation." But is that really compatible with the bleak sense of tragedy and emptiness that he claims for the poem elsewhere? Maybe there should be an industry of optimist and pessimist readings of Adam Parry.

Rereading Clausen's "Interpretation" (1964) stirs another kind of puzzlement. It was published in a more conventional journal than Parry's piece, but it too is an elegant essay of broad scope, of a kind that we would be unlikely to find in a learned journal today. The puzzle is that it

seems so unexceptionable. Was it really radical or controversial? Clausen himself later described the piece as “extreme; more right than wrong, yet in need of qualification.” Extreme? True, it stresses the melancholy aspect of the poem, but that is mostly a matter of emphasis. Clausen shares some of Parry’s feeling for style and tone, as when he finds the cadence strangely affecting in *fortemque Gyan fortemque Cloanthum* (“brave Gyas and brave Cloanthus,” 1.222)—in fact, I had forgotten that it was Clausen, not Parry, who said that. He is not as elusive (or as original) as Parry, but he too is not always perfectly clear. Probably the most famous phrase in the essay is “a long Pyrrhic victory of the human spirit,” his description of Virgil’s perception of Roman history. I must admit that if I had thought of that phrase, I should have found it hard to resist using it. But whether or not we ourselves think that the description fits the facts, there is the question of whether it fits Clausen’s own view. A Pyrrhic victory may appear a success at the moment, but it is a disaster in the long term. Virgil’s Whig view of history is the reverse of this: there are bleakness and sorrow in the shorter term, great sacrifices and sufferings to endure, but the longer vision is hopeful. Some may contest that interpretation of Virgil, but Clausen surely would not have done so: he believed (as Parry perhaps did not) that the poet valued the Roman achievement and took pride in it.

Marx is supposed to have claimed that he was not a Marxist, and it is sometimes said that Mrs. Thatcher was not really a Thatcherite. In similar spirit, I find myself wondering if the founders of the Harvard School actually belonged to it. It is partly that the later products of this school grew more one-sidedly pessimist: one seldom finds in them the aesthetic consolation explored by Parry or the balance of loss and gain asserted by Clausen. But I also associate with the Harvard School a particular method: a seizure of particular details of language which are held to reveal, maybe in coded form, the poet’s real meaning, and to counteract or cancel those things that he says overtly or more extensively in a contrary sense. Parry and Clausen each had a nice eye for detail, but this is not a method that they used. Later proponents of the Harvard School tend to be systematic and academic, interpreting Virgil as a scholar poet; Parry’s and Clausen’s prose is the conversation of literary gentlemen.

Were these two essays children of their time? Clausen pointed out that they were written too early to reflect the turbulence of the sixties, but he did suggest that the “mild-minded pessimism of the Harvard

School . . . reflects the mood of the fifties” (1995: 313). To which one might possibly add a cultivated Yankee distaste for European imperialism. And the disposition, a decade later, to regard all authority as bad and self-serving did at least harmonize with the disposition to hear Virgil as a subversive voice (what was the moment, I wonder, at which “subversive” became a term of literary praise?). What I myself wrote, in a review in *TLS* in 1990, was this:

To judge by his interpreters, Virgil is the most protean of poets. In the United States he dropped out during the sixties and protested against the Vietnam War; this bead-draped figure still haunts the American campus, and may be seen in some British senior common rooms too, glowering over the *New Statesman* at his younger avatar, a brisk, tough Virgil for the eighties, who accepts the Augustan regime smartly enough, on the grounds that there is no alternative.

That was flippant, of course, but there may be a scintilla of truth buried in it.

However, the trouble with supposing that scholars are blown about by the zeitgeist is that the argument tends to come de haut en bas: the writer implicitly supposes that everyone is prejudiced except him and the few enlightened allies who think like him. Or, to avoid this, he supposes that we are all alike caged helplessly in the prison of our days, incapable of unbiased judgment. I do not believe it, and indeed there is another side to that coin. Students today find it hard to take the ideology of imperialism seriously, assuming it to be necessarily shallow and dishonest, and this blinds them to one aspect of Virgil’s thought. By contrast, the liberal imperialists of the late-Victorian era, rather than being misled by the spirit of the age, were in an especially good position to understand this side of Virgil. We might reflect, too, that this was the era that produced Tennyson’s poem to Virgil: the sense of loss and sacrifice was bound into the ideal of imperial service.

And there is another reason for not regarding these essays as children of their age, one that I have already given: that they are in a way children of another age, belles lettres of a kind that was already old-fashioned when they were written. I said that I did not intend “old-fashioned” to be disparaging, and I meant it. What I imagine that each scholar was doing was choosing the style of discourse that best fitted what he had to say, and this happened to be a style that even then had almost disappeared from academic journals. By a mild paradox, the essays were

old-fashioned in form because in content they were timeless, and it is because they are timeless that they remain essential still.

OXFORD UNIVERSITY

On The Harvard School Forty Years After

W. R. JOHNSON

It was in the senior year of Latin that I first encountered Virgil's epic (books 1, 2, 4, 6), which was then regarded as an allegorical imitation of Homer, a poem in which a court poet of genius celebrated Augustus, savior of Rome and its empire. Since our main concerns were with syntax, scansion, and vocabulary, we spent little time considering what the poem might mean. Its hero, Aeneas, patriotic and brave, if somewhat dull, founded the city that his heir would save from destruction and, along with its empire, would preserve for the ages. What could be more transparent than that?

Almost a decade later, after a few years of service in the army, while doing graduate work in classics at Berkeley, I met with Virgil's epic again. This time I read the poem from cover to cover and taught it in translation in survey courses. Now, I quickly discovered that I and the poem and the times had changed. Its hero was now, though still loyal and courageous, ambiguous and conflicted, and the allegory he enacted was enigmatic and dim (an impression that the second half of the poem magnified). What had happened? I was reading the poem in the Berkeley of the Free Speech Movement, Civil Rights marches, Vietnam War protests, and Reagan's governance. This situation of discourse did nothing to help solve the problem I was having with the *Aeneid*.

What helped me was coming upon the writers I was a decade later to name the Harvard School, and what helped me in particular was the book by Michael Putnam (1965).

It was not until years after *Darkness Visible* that I began to see that members of my School (along with Robert Lowell and Robert Fitzgerald) had been reading the *Aeneid* during another, earlier period of disruption, the late 1940s and early 1950s: Hiroshima, the Cold War, the