



PROJECT MUSE®

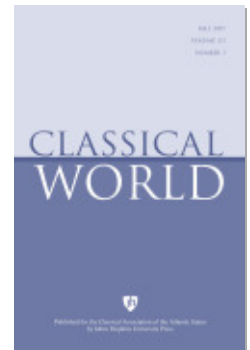
Mending the Well-Wrought Urn

Charles Martindale

Classical World, Volume 111, Number 1, Fall 2017, pp. 90-94 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/clw.2017.0076>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/676944>

These issues continue to exercise me, as my most recent engagement with the *Aeneid* in the second chapter of my *Antiquity and the Meanings of Time* (2013) shows. I don't mention Parry there, but he memorably developed for his moment and his context, and for me, an agenda about the relationship of aesthetics and politics. Students in my classes on the *Aeneid* will recall me juxtaposing his essay with Walter Benjamin's dictum from his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" that "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism," followed by the injunction "Discuss!" This they duly did, with results for all concerned that were never less than interesting.

UNIVERSITY OF BRISTOL

Mending the Well-Wrought Urn

CHARLES MARTINDALE

One form my teenage rebellion took was to embrace a version of aestheticism (not that I knew the word then). I devoured books like Walter Pater's *Renaissance*, or the brothers Goncourt on French rococo painting, and wrote an essay on the diaphanous beauties of Giambattista Tiepolo for my somewhat bemused schoolmaster. I thought then, as I think now, that historicist approaches too often neglect the literary or aesthetic character of their objects of study, in a manner that can verge on philistinism. My favorite critical book when reading for Mods at Oxford in 1968–69 was Steele Commager's *The Odes of Horace*, published six years earlier but not recommended by my teachers (and barely mentioned in the great Oxford commentary by Nisbet and Hubbard). It's a book that, half a century later, in my experience wears remarkably well, with its sophisticated attention to the detailed verbal texture of Horatian lyric. Only later would I learn to think of this as the classicist's version of the New Criticism (another favorite was Christopher Ricks's *Milton's Grand Style*, very much the sort of book I wanted to write myself). The New Critical slogan for this is "the words on the page," and, while we know words are never just on the page, the primary job of the literary critic surely remains to address *this* particular combination of words in

a poem or piece of prose. So I was well prepared to receive favorably the writings of Adam Parry on Homer and Virgil, including the “Two Voices” essay that became one of founding charters of what was oddly reified by W. R. Johnson under the name Harvard School. Parry’s essay was first published in *Arion* in 1963 (what a great project that journal has proved, with its predominantly literary and critical emphasis), and republished in a collection, on the whole but not entirely New Critical in character, edited by Commager, in 1966. Few surely would have guessed just how large an impact it would have. In the recent Wiley-Blackwell *Virgil Encyclopedia*, Parry’s presence is everywhere, with entries on “‘two voices’ theory,” “winners and losers” (these two by Harvard scholar and member of the School Richard Thomas, one of the editors), “ambiguity,” “Harvard School,” and “optimism and pessimism,” among others. And in retrospect it is not hard to see the reasons for its enduring appeal. It presents a strong thesis that is easily taught and grasped, and that can readily be applied to almost any part of the Virgilian corpus. (In that respect it is like Stanley Fish’s hugely influential reading of *Paradise Lost, Surprised by Sin* (1967), according to which the reader is continually caught out in her fallenness, only to have her views corrected by the poem.) It makes Virgil available again for readers of liberal sympathies, hostile to war, imperialism, and one-man rule, and thus makes Virgil again “ours” as he was for Seneca. And above all it is seductively written—critics who want to persuade others of their views please take note!

Later, disciplined by the severities of a newer poststructuralist criticism, I would come to see some of the vulnerabilities of Parry’s thesis, and I wrote about these in 1993 in *Redeeming the Text* (40–43) and “Descent into Hell: Reading Ambiguity, or Virgil and the Critics.” Parry’s catapulting into fame of the plangent lines on the dead Umbro as “the lyric cry” that sets a tone for the whole poem might be countered by other choices; if we are to trust Suetonius, Augustus’ could have been *Romanos rerum dominos gentemque togatam* (“the Romans, masters of the world and the toga-wearing race,” *Aen.* 1.282). While of course *publicus* and *privatus* are Latin words, it is not clear how well they map onto the categories of “public” and “private” as used by a twentieth-century liberal. In Horace *Ode* 1.37, Cleopatra is *privata* when no longer a queen; it is not necessarily the case that for Virgil the landscape’s lament for its young men who die in its defense is a private matter. Nor is the *Aeneid*’s lachrymose tone, if that is how we characterize it—the Dryden version, for example, is much more sprightly overall—necessarily at odds

with an imperial vision; something of the same combination, it can be argued, is found in the writings of Kipling or Tennyson (of course for Parry and his followers empire is an unqualified negative). “Ambiguity,” that New Critical keyword, can be refigured from an inherent quality of the text to a readerly practice, or as a sign of ideological fissures that the text seeks to smooth over, or of its self-deconstructing character. None of this means that Parry’s interpretation is simply “wrong,” any more than that it is “right.” Literary hermeneutics cannot be understood according to this simple binary opposition (on the model of a fact that is either “true” or “false”). All interpretations, not just this one, are contestable, and the methodologies that are used to interpret poems are closely bound up with the results they generate; switch the lens and you see something different. Parry and his Harvard School followers mobilized particular features of the poem to tell a story that is better described as “powerful” or even as “beautiful” than as “true.”

All in all, despite any such provisos, my admiration for “The Two Voices” has remained undimmed, and Parry’s essay, repeatedly re-encountered, continues to exert its old spell. I still use it to provoke discussion in seminars, which it invariably does. True, the debate about optimism versus pessimism (somewhat stark alternatives surely) has become rather routinized and unproductive, and the best service Parry’s great essay could perform might rather be to inspire a critic of today to produce something of equal quality that was equally readable and equally good to think with, “lest one good custom should corrupt the world.” Yet I hesitate. I write these brief remarks as Britain seeks to sever, or reduce, the connections it has had with Europe over the last half century. It remains to be seen how this will affect our relationship with the poet whom T. S. Eliot (enlisted, it will be remembered, into Johnson’s opposing “European school”) called “the classic of all Europe” (1945:130). I suspect that we English and Welsh may come to resemble the spectacle of the unburied dead in *Aeneid* 6: *tendebantque manus ripae ulterioris amore* (“They were stretching out their hands through love of the farther shore,” *Aen.* 6.314). When the great Helen Waddell (1976: 40) first heard the German bombers over London, she thought of the haunting words of Aeneas at Troy’s sack, *venit summa dies et ineluctabile tempus / Dardaniae* (“For Troy, the final day has come, and the unavoidable time,” *Aen.* 2.324–325), reflecting no doubt on the mingling in the poem of plangent despair and hope for redemption, in the tradition of the Christianized Virgils of Dante, Tennyson, and Eliot; the

eternal return then of those two voices, if with a rather different emphasis from Parry's.

Of these three poets it is Tennyson, who, if hardly Virgil's equal, is to my mind closest to him in mood, sensibility, and the particular music of his verse. In both poets there is a constant concern with beauty of sound, with verbalism, with results that are often lyrical in the modern sense of the word more than traditionally epic, and, in the slow movement of the verse, an almost constantly perceptible sadness. Tennyson's love letter "To Virgil," written for his nineteenth centenary, responds to many facets of Virgil's achievement, not just those qualities romantic taste privileged as his sole merit, the feeling for the tears of things, what John Henry Newman (1870: 76) called "his single words and phrases, his pathetic half-lines, giving utterance, as the voice of Nature herself, to that pain and weariness, yet hope of better things, which is the experience of her children in every time," but also the grandeur, the sense of Rome and empire and destiny, of time and historical process. In the formulation of the critic Seamus Perry (2005: 19), "Tennyson was peculiarly preoccupied, in mutually complicating ways, by the ideas of change (its dreadful inescapability, its redemptive progressiveness) and of changelessness (its stultifying paralysis, its wonderful immutability)," in this too a modern Virgil, "one on whom the consciousness of time bore like a burden" (the words are those of Humphry House [1955: 127]). The *Idylls of the King* are widely seen as falling short of truly epic grasp, but the combination of noble heroic melancholy with an (un-Homeric) sense of temporal process catches the grave march of the *Aeneid* uniquely for the period and better perhaps than any translation of any period:

He saw
 Straining his eyes beneath an arch of hand,
 Or thought he saw, the speck that bare the King,
 Down that long water opening on the deep
 Somewhere far off, pass on and on, and go
 From less to less and vanish into light.
 And the new sun rose bringing the new year.

(*Passing of Arthur*, 464–470)

In terms of its reception at least the *Aeneid* has lent itself to dialectical accounts and embodied the quality that in his essay on Andrew Marvell Eliot termed "wit," and which he defined as "a recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which

are possible” (1921: 170). So perhaps it may be more than simply a pity that Virgil is no longer taught in our schools—in our current crisis he might, just, have saved us. *Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt* (“There are tears for things, and mortal affairs touch the heart,” (*Aen.* 1.462).

UNIVERSITY OF BRISTOL

Aeneas’ Journey and Mine

CHRISTINE G. PERKELL

Whether or not the Harvard School—if there ever was such a thing—is responsible for the pessimistic side of the optimism–pessimism debate in criticism of Vergil’s work, there is no doubt that it is both Harvard and School to me. Wendell Clausen, Zeph Stewart, and Michael Putnam were life- and career-changing figures for me. Clausen’s wonderful, famous “Interpretation” article (1964) made me into a Vergil person. I had had one class with Professor Clausen before reading the article. His erudition and elegance were way over my head, but I understood the article and was thrilled by it. It opened up for me the haunting depth of feeling and moral challenge of the poem. I was hooked! Zeph Stewart, a most noble person and my thesis adviser, suggested I should work on optimism–pessimism in the *Georgics*. (Apparently there was critical scholarly dispute on this topic.) This led to another thrill: it was EASY to ferret out the pessimism! I was all on board for pessimism. Sometime later, however, it became clear to me that perceived optimism and optimistic readers would need to be accounted for. How should one read or understand a poem with both optimism and pessimism, public and private, internal contradictions, fissures, and so on? Where is *authority* in the poem? And what explains why even learned readers read the same text so differently?

This question had to be confronted. It was necessary to find a way, not to resolve the seeming contradictions or fissures (a strategy pursued by many), but to accommodate them in some more comprehensive understanding. Over the years I came upon some theories and memorable