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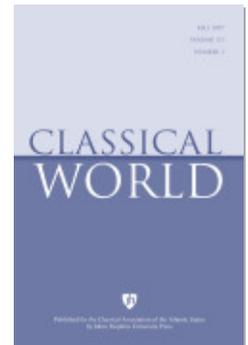
## Aeneas' Journey and Mine

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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

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## 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

quotes that, I feel, advanced me on this quest (see Perzell 2014). The Clausen article, beyond its seductive suggestiveness (e.g., “Virgil was not merely telling the time of night”), was revelatory in showing how Vergil’s allusions to Homer depend for their meaning on their differences from Homer. With his illuminating reading of Aeneas’ first speech against its Odyssean model, he essentially shows how Vergil is offering a “reading” of and commentary on the *Odyssey* while also creating, by difference from the model, something new and distinctly Roman. Another key passage: Stanley Fish explaining how interpretive cruxes are “not meant to be solved but to be experienced (they signify)” (1976: 465). James Redfield, in conversation: “the poet is always the hero” and “structure is meaning.” He elaborates these thoughts in print (1975: 23):

The characters in a poem are as the poet made them, and he made them as he would have them for the needs of his work. When we think of the poem as a made thing, a construct, we abandon the point of view of the characters and take our stand with the poet. We ask what sort of meaning the poet is conveying and how he seeks to convey it; we shall find this meaning conveyed, not in the represented experience of any single character, but in the poem as a whole. We thus shift our interest from character to plot, taking “plot” in a very broad sense as the implicit conceptual unity which has given the work its actual form.

Harry Berger, speaking of pastoral: The critic’s critical and difficult task is to figure out if the speaker is the poet’s “mouthpiece” or his “target” (1984: 7). It is important to be able to distinguish the poet from the narrator and the narrator from the speakers; irony can abound. Hayden White on moral meaning in (historical) narrative: “The demand for closure in the historical story is a demand, I suggest, for moral meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama” (1980: 25). Michael Silk on the subversive character of great texts: “The greatest literature . . . is wont to subvert the dominant ideological categories that it purports to, and does indeed also, embody” (2004: 84). Narratology’s term “focalization”: Who is speaking? For instance, when Aeneas says “*Pallas immolat*,” who is saying it is a sacrifice: the narrator or Aeneas? To know that that is even a question, requiring an interpretive decision, is liberating.

In sum, the optimism–pessimism controversy has compelled me to try to learn how to read, narrative most especially, and Vergil in particular. Literary critical theory of various kinds has enabled me to see in

the *Aeneid* (and also in other texts, including life) a richer, more challenging poem than I ever would have otherwise. And because the contested passages and questions in Vergil center on big questions—moral choices, use of power, nature of the gods and the cosmos—engagement with Vergil has never seemed inconsequential. The optimism–pessimism controversy has been a challenge to critical thought, to self-awareness in interpreting texts of all kinds. So I feel that the Harvard School of criticism is one of the best things that has happened to me since I learned the alphabet—and the best thing that has happened to Vergil reception since Dante.

EMORY UNIVERSITY

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## The Harvard School, Virgil, and Political History: Pure Innocence or Pure in No Sense?

ANTON POWELL

The most trustworthy tributes often come inverted, from opponents, free of suspicion of flattery. I confess that the work of the Harvard School has revitalized study of Virgil, and in my own case has helped evoke, provoke, years of work on what I consider to be increasingly misunderstood poetry. It is comforting to observe that far better qualified critics than I consider the most familiar arguments of the Harvard School to be, as Bertrand Russell wrote of Plato, “still worth refuting.”

A miner with myopia, who has identified a rich seam but is—unless his vision be corrected—unable to exploit it scientifically, may do important damage. The HS, in my opinion, implies an attitude to political history, and biography, which is unexamined, wishful, and self-indulgent—yet may leave in its wake scholarly progress of the first importance.

The Harvard School depends importantly on linguistic evasion or “persuasive definition.” Its own name, proudly assumed at times, gives away nothing about attitude to Virgil, while its members have divided critics misleadingly into “pessimists” and “optimists.” One inadequately defined term indeed has become a password: “disturbing.” Miners in the Harvard seam announce their finds with this word above all. Richard