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Innocence or Pure in No Sense?

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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

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

Thomas, in his long march through parts of Virgil's text and its reception, has succeeded—to the genuine benefit of the subject—in finding much which qualifies as “disturbing.” But precisely who is disturbed to find apparent reservations in the poet's attitude towards Augustus and his regime? Only the modern reader? Surely the implication is less modest in its scope: interpreters from the Harvard School may rather hope to tell us about the poet's resistance to pro-Augustan ideas of his own day. Some of Virgil's contemporaries were, it seems, meant by the poet to be disturbed by such things as Augustus' ancestor shown closing the *Aeneid* with the passionate execution of an enemy. Now, if scholars of the Harvard School claim to tell us anything about Virgil's intentions towards his contemporary audience, they are committed to doing political history, to a study of what that audience knew about Octavian–Augustus, *and thought possible for the future*. Yet this is a study they seldom attempt.

An audience that has lived through decades of civil war does itself tend to be disturbed, both by what it has lived through and also by (to reapply a phrase of Tacitus, *Ann.* 14.31) *metu graviorum*, the fear of worse in future. That precarious future, for Virgil's contemporary audience, extended far beyond Actium; no contemporary could reasonably expect that a ruler with a record of serious ill health, heir to a tradition of short-lived rule by warlords (Marius, Sulla, Pompey, Caesar, Antony), would survive in power for some forty-five years after Antony's defeat. Contemporaries of Virgil knew of Octavian as the most implacable killer among the triumvirs, who even in stopping his proscriptions had insisted on the right to restart them (Suet. *Aug.* 27.1f.). Contemporaries of Virgil also knew that the civil wars of the 40s and 30s had been far deeper and longer than a modern reader might suspect from Virgil's text. Literary scholars, guided by that text, have reached a circular interpretation of history: that since Virgil never explicitly refers to the Republicans who fought on for six years after Philippi (42–36 BCE), repeatedly defeating Octavian at sea and coming within an ace of capturing him (at Tauromenium in 36), such things were not important for Virgil's poetry. The civil wars are sometimes presented as virtually ending in 42 only to reopen in 31. But I have uttered a book on this subject (2008).

In short, the Harvard School does not attend critically to Roman history. If it did, it would realize that what we may feel to be disturbing elements in Aeneas' character, perhaps introduced by Virgil to create by implication a pointedly maculate image of his descendant Augustus, in

reality offered to contemporaries something that might, in its historical context, be positively soothing. In contrast with the lethal and unstable triumvir of history, the Aeneas created by Virgil offered a sanitized, ultimately sympathetic Julian, an “Octavian-lite.” Compare Aeneas’ hesitant final treatment of Turnus with Octavian’s recorded procedure in dispatching the Praetor Quintus Gallius (Suet. *Aug.* 27.4). Virgil’s Aeneas is a hero who, even in his wrath, was reassuringly understandable (and therefore predictable) rather than disturbing. The *Aeneid*, far from being a daring essay in discrepant “voices,” may be apologia. Concessions made to the imperfections of Octavian–Augustus may be the classic recourse of the defensive advocate with a difficult client: “Yes, I admit . . . but . . .” The commentator Tiberius Claudius Donatus said something similar: Virgil “openly states the things that could not be denied [about Aeneas], eliminates the accusation, and then turns it into praise” (see Powell 2008: 285). The position of Augustus himself, on hearing or reading in the *Aeneid* of the hero’s righteous *furor* against an enemy, should perhaps remind us of Robert Clive, military founder of the British Raj. Accused in Parliament of accepting huge bribes to spare Indian cities, Clive, far from feeling guilty, exclaimed, “I stand astonished at my own *moderation*.”

In its subjective wishfulness, the Harvard School is heir to a tradition that—especially since the medium is poetry—logic may never extinguish. Virgil has long been *noster*; he is interpreted diversely between individuals, and can be plastic even within the work of a single interpreter. Virgil has had a “soul naturally Christian.” For a founder of the Harvard School, Michael Putnam, Aeneas was first “a man for whom emotion means little” (1965: 157), but in a later shift became one who felt “grief . . . anger . . . bereft” at the loss of his beautiful young Pallas (1998: 68). For Richard Thomas, Virgil fortified protest against the Vietnam War (2001: xi) and had a strikingly modern attitude towards the destruction of the natural environment. We see the pedagogic utility, in a culture where students resist a canon of Dead White European Males: at least this ancient male can be pressed into service as an anti-imperialist, a bisexual, an ecologist. Any of us who care for our subject, care indeed for our students, may be tempted into pedagogic opportunism. A necessary antidote is to resist the urge, empowering though it may be for the newcomer to the subject, to pick out a few convenient passages of Virgil, isolating them from their long context and the logical development of a whole work—things far harder to master. A very recent

antidote to “short-distance reading,” insisting on the need to examine the long structures of Virgil’s rhetoric, is Hans-Peter Stahl’s monograph (2016), forcefully directed against aspects of the Harvard School. Here I myself have a special interest, and should not say more. But on the wider subject of assimilating Virgil (and indeed other ancient authors, such as Xenophon, whose comments on tyranny may be read as irony congenial to ourselves), of resisting or downplaying elements of antiquity which may seem alien, there is a danger that thoughtful anti-imperialists (and ecologists) may do well to observe. If we flatten difference, refuse the notion of cultures even in the remote past, we may effectively encourage attempts at military conquest in our own time. If, for example, there is in our age to be an *End of History* and people (for example) in Muslim countries are essentially “like us,” it may be fortifying to assume that, if offered our norms such as parliamentary democracy, gender equality, and Western physical prosperity, foreigners may—after being triumphantly invaded—quickly acquiesce. In its political innocence the Harvard School, so apparently concerned to relate Virgil to modern governmental policy, may be encouraging a very bad habit. Logic and humanity perhaps both require that we study our ancient predecessors, like our modern neighbors, with a minimum of prejudice. What is *not* entirely congenial may be particularly worthy of study, as hard to predict. A partly alien Virgil may happen to be the best pedagogy.

There is, to end, perhaps one other area where the neglect of history has led the Harvard School into *aporia*, if unconsciously. *If*, as Harvardians believe, Virgil was subtly performing in the *Aeneid* an elaborate subversion of Augustan claims, what reason do we have to suppose that Augustus would have tolerated such, or would have been unaware of it? Unless we can answer these questions, we may be implying the possibility that the poet was foolhardy—or self-sacrificing. (Or did Virgil perhaps know that Augustus positively welcomed a *safe* degree of nuancing, of apologia, regarding his own image? Again there are modern historical studies of this: see especially Welch 2009.) Both as Octavian and as Augustus, the Julian chief had a short way with embarrassing or problematic people—from his own family outwards. If scholars of the Harvard School would address the question of Virgil’s politics in Virgil’s political context, they might even find something particularly congenial to the romantic, anti-establishment sentiments of many literary critics (and of very many young students): poet as willing martyr in a humane cause.

Here an opportunistic use of ancient texts is again involved, on the part of Harvard School interpreters. They, and critics generally, are happy to exploit the ancient Lives of Virgil, and especially the Suetonian–Donatan Life (*Vit. Verg.*), but only *à la carte*. It is from these source(s) that they, we, derive the vulgate, now treated as fact, that the poet died in 19 BC (*Vit. Verg.* 35). Other reports from the Suetonian biography are treated with similar respect, as on the relative chronology of Virgil's poems and the beautiful story of Octavia fainting as the poet read of Marcellus. But the Suetonian *Life* is not exploited systematically, perhaps for reasons of wishfulness. For it gives information eminently suggestive of political dependence: that Virgil had a home next to Maecenas' gardens (*Vit. Verg.* 13)—that is, in one of the most privileged, presumably best-guarded, parts of Rome—that he was a rich man, and left a large sum (precise details are given at *Vit. Verg.* 13, 37) in his will to Augustus. If we treat the *Life* without prejudice, we also find evidence that Virgil could be an important nuisance to his ultimate patron. Suetonius seems to quote verbatim from correspondence (to which as secretary to Trajan and Hadrian he may well have had access) in which Augustus “begged” and “demanded” (*efflagitarat*) with jocularly expressed threats that the poet show him elements of the *Aeneid* (*Vit. Verg.* 31). And there is the remarkable story that Virgil was on his way to a distant provincial retreat, proposing to spend three years on completing his epic poem, only to meet Augustus in Athens, abandon his journey, stay in the Princes' company, be stricken, persistently attempt to burn the poem only to have it taken out of his hands—and die (*Vit. Verg.* esp. 35, 39). There is, for the historian of Octavian–Augustus, a remarkable number of those who obstructed his will and who died (in a phrase repeated in our sources) “shortly afterwards” (Powell 2017, forthcoming). Cleopatra VII is only the best known. Here, perhaps, is a serious—if sensational—*possibility* on which the Harvard School and its opponents may concur. Whether we think of the poet of the *Aeneid* as a systematic underminer of Augustus, or merely as a fairly obedient but willful author who inconveniently withheld, and then threatened to destroy, a poem which the Princes evidently judged of great benefit to himself, we may agree that Virgil *possibly* paid a high price for his flight close to the sun: that Augustus, to secure the poem, *possibly* hastened its author's end. Opportunity and various (if conflicting and complicated) motives are both easily conceived, and a suspect's homicidal past is established. But perhaps the study of a little more history might here have the perverse

effect of consolidating Harvardian wishfulness, and cementing the romantic idea of Virgil as an independent spirit defying, and ultimately falling victim to, the oppression of his own times.

CLASSICAL PRESS OF WALES

Virgil the Homerist

MICHAEL C. J. PUTNAM

Besides the often-cited work of Bernard Knox and Viktor Pöschl, the scholarly writing and the pedagogical distinction of three people, Reuben Brower, J. P. Elder, and Cedric Whitman, were of paramount importance to me as background for writing *The Poetry of the Aeneid*. I was privileged to count them also as close friends, as well as continuing mentors, for the remainder of their lives.

Brower, teacher of teachers par excellence, educated me and my peers in how to analyze great literature, especially through his first book, *The Fields of Light: An Experiment in Critical Reading* (1951). And the result of our “close reading,” he instructed us, would be an appreciation of the moral value of our chosen texts.

Beginning in the decade after the conclusion of World War II, Elder was a leader in applying the principles of New Criticism to Latin literature through a series of masterful interpretations of the great Roman poets for his students to emulate. Both Brower and Elder illustrated that the honest appraisal of words and their richness of meaning was the surest avenue toward appropriate critical evaluation.

But it was Whitman’s monumental *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (1958), especially the chapters entitled “Fire and Other Elements” and “Achilles: The Evolution of a Hero,” that most helped me toward my own understanding of Virgil’s great epic and especially of its conclusion where the infuriate Aeneas dispatches Turnus, his suppliant foe.

The wrath of the Greek hero permeates the *Iliad* from its opening line, and Whitman’s work confirmed my own view of the *Aeneid* as a parallel text formed by a cycle that commences with the anger of Juno, rousing up a destructive tempest against her hated Trojan exiles, and