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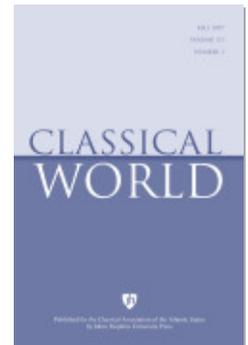
The *Aeneid* as Space of Poetic Negotiation

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does require us to include in the investigation ourselves—I mean our selves, those diverse, mutable entities—as subjects in the inexhaustible narratological exchange.

BROWN UNIVERSITY

The *Aeneid* as Space of Poetic Negotiation

SARAH SPENCE

The *Aeneid*, written to establish a link between Augustus and the gods and justify the enormous imperial expansion Augustus was undertaking, is indeed a story of empire. Yet the epic tells that story in a complex way, laying the groundwork for current events, pointing out the pitfalls encountered along the way, and perhaps most importantly, using the medium of poetry to articulate what the potential for empire might be.

The Harvard School has been epitomized as foregrounding the dark side of the *Aeneid*: the so-called pessimistic versus optimistic approaches to the poem. Characterizing the critical approach this way, though, is to reduce it to a foil made inevitable, in a sense, by a reading that emphasizes the glory that was Rome: the founding of the empire came with a large price tag. To approach the epic as a poem, by contrast, is to allow it to play out—and with—unresolved possibilities, to emphasize the *poetry* of the *Aeneid*, as Michael Putnam urged through the title of his first book. Putnam's methodology was unabashedly New Critical as it highlighted echoes, self-citations, and figures of speech within the epic and across Vergil's oeuvre. In so doing, Putnam opened the door to reading the *Aeneid* as poetry, as he foregrounded the ways in which Vergil's lines disturbed the message and were both epic and elegiac in nature. Three contemporary lyric poets with whom I have discussed the *Aeneid* at length, Rosanna Warren, Mark Strand, and David Ferry, respond to the *Aeneid* precisely because of its elegiac nature. Warren's poem "Turnus," dedicated to Putnam, speaks of the gaping hole Aeneas and Vergil rip in the end of the poem with Turnus' death:

Here's where you tear a hole in the poem,
a hole in the mind, here's where the russet glare

of ships aflame and the pyre and the amethyst gleam
from the boy's sword belt rise and roil in a blur.

Strand wrote of Vergil that he was “the first great gardener in the landscape of grief” and his favorite passage was the empty paternal embrace of Aeneas and Anchises in the underworld. Ferry too finds loss in an embrace: his reading of the end of book 2 evokes both the death of his wife Anne—his Creusa, his Eurydice—and his understanding of the lyric as a medium where something is always left behind. The sense of loss that permeates their readings of the poem echoes that of Putnam, among now many others.

Another poet, Joseph Brodsky, once wrote me that he preferred the *Georgics* to the *Aeneid*, presumably because he felt, as a Russian expat, that a poem about empire had to be propagandistic.¹ Certainly the *Aeneid* is often presented that way. Yet poetry can also be a locus of political debate, especially if the debate is as much about conflict as it is about imperial expansion. Think, for instance, of the highly successful current Broadway musical *Hamilton*, which uses history set in the contemporary medium of hip-hop to deconstruct the interpretation of events past and present. Vergil did no less, and in the *Aeneid* uniquely combines the Greek epic tradition with the Hellenistic lyric: arguing for political truths by foregrounding the poetic and exploring the poetic possibilities of political situations, of poetry as engaged in politics and empire. The *Aeneid* is poetry, not propaganda for and against: its great strength lies in its unwillingness to be pinned down on one side or the other. Even the resolution is a compromise, and even that compromise asks more questions than it answers.

New Criticism works best when exposing the lyric issues of a work, as an approach that complicates the plot through attention to the lexical elements of the poem. As an epic, the *Aeneid* cries out for an approach that projects these finds onto the political landscape. To my mind, Vergil argues for the importance of poetic negotiation in the framing of political systems. Empire rises from many sources, but in Vergil's hands, epic poetry offers a space for political deliberation. The *Aeneid* is not so much a poem about the costs of empire—or its glory—as it is a celebration of the capacity of poetry to debate and negotiate empire's highs

¹ Letter from summer 1994. For more on Joseph Brodsky, see Torlone 2015 and in this issue.

and lows. Neither pro- nor anti-imperial, the *Aeneid* as a poem offers glimpses of the complex web of contingencies that engages both sides: of the beauties of the new land at Carthage and the sorrow of the Troades on Sicily who have seen too many new lands; of the deaths of Dido and Turnus and the survival through it all of Aeneas and Ascanius; of the overbearingness of Jupiter and of his careful consolation of Venus. These are complex characters in real-life scenarios, not allegories in barren landscapes, and their decisions and choices are enriched by indecision and doubt.

This particular approach may not be that of the Harvard School, since it denies the preeminence of loss and argues instead for the presence of ongoing debate, but it would not have been possible without the insistence of those readers, and the poets who followed their lead, on the poetic and often elegiac nature of the *Aeneid*.

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The Harvard Vergil: Memoir of *The Black Sheep*

HANS-PETER STAHL

The influence the Harvard School has had on my scholarship? Among the questions you ask, this is a challenging one indeed, Professor Hejduk, and it comes at an (in)opportune time: I have recently published a monograph on the *Aeneid* (Stahl 2016, subtitled a *Recovery Study*), which along its way is widely critical of the Harvard School. The book is not written for short-distance readers who pick decontextualized passages, scenes, and “verbal echoes” for their “reading,” but it pays attention to the artifice’s long-distance organization (the existence of which it has lately been fashionable to deny, with “desiderated” results). So one might of course, with equal justification, ask your question also the other way around. The long-range answer there, I’m afraid, would probably be, to use a Harvard School code word, “disturbing.”

Considering the long gestation period of my book over many decades and the guiding track it lays on the Latin side of my scholarship,