The "Harvard School": A Historical Note by an Alumnus

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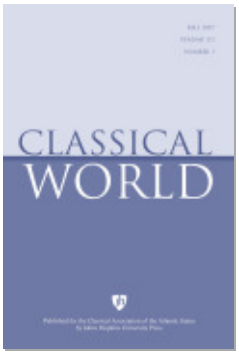

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Anchises famously does in mistaking Crete for Italy. It teaches us that the more we know, the more we will honor diversity. To know anything is to trade its entirety for a constantly changing variety. In poetry as in politics, adherence to a single belief system or school is always tempting and always wrong.

Schools define and categorize and limit growth. Whether there is or ever was a Harvard School, I do not know. I do know that it is a good thing that readings of the *Aeneid* change with time. Otherwise, Vergil might still be a proto-Christian or a medieval necromancer or an optimist or a pessimist or a semiotician or worse. As I once wrote for Vergil, on his birthday (2015: 168):

> Your poem ends with *umbras*.
> Once I found that sad. No longer.
> Now I like shadows. They are companions—
> bread for the journey.
>
> Shadows change, lengthen, contract,
> fade and come again,
> like kindness or a friend.
> What you see depends on where you stand.

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JAMES ZETZEL

When Ralph Johnson's *Darkness Visible* came out in 1976, I read the opening pages with a certain amount of perplexity and annoyance: as someone who grew up in Harvard Square and studied classics at Harvard for nine years, how could I have missed an edifice as imposing as the Harvard School? As I knew then, and as most classicists probably knew, the Harvard School is an imaginary (re)construction, invented not quite from whole cloth in 1976: this is the fortieth, not the fiftieth anniversary. Ralph is a scholar I admire, for his rhetoric as much as anything

else: he created two schools of thought about Virgil, both of which are simplifications and neither of which is historically accurate, in order to find his own Third (California?) Way—which he did, very successfully. But it is fiction nonetheless, and my intention here is not to talk about Virgil or Virgilian criticism as such, but to offer a little history and background mixed with autobiography.[1]

I first studied Virgil with Wendell Clausen (*Eclogues* and *Georgics*) in the summer of 1964—just when his "Interpretation" appeared in print. After I first taught the *Aeneid* in 1975, I was in Cambridge and visited him, saying how much my students (and I) admired that article. He sighed deeply and said that he feared it was the only thing he would be remembered for. As he says in his note in Horsfall's *Companion* (1995), he had first written it fifteen years earlier (although, knowing him, I am sure that he revised it painstakingly over and over again). In 1964 he was much more engaged in the topic of Roman Alexandrianism—not unrelated, in fact—which occupied him for much of the rest of his life. That same summer at FIEC in Philadelphia he spoke on "Callimachus and Latin Poetry," which appeared as an article in the same year.

I talked with Wendell once about Ralph Johnson's "Harvard School," a creation which annoyed him greatly. It was, he said then (and in the note in Horsfall), a product of Amherst, where he and Adam Parry both taught in the 1950s. That is partly true, but it does not altogether explain the similarity of tone between Clausen and Parry on one side and the *echt* Harvardians R. A. Brooks and Michael Putnam. And here I would like to offer a slightly different background, and name three scholars whose influence, I suspect, was largely responsible for this line of interpretation.

What the articles of Clausen, Parry, and Brooks and Putnam's book share—and I think I would add to the list some others, such as Kenneth Reckford's article on *Aeneid* 7 (1961)—is an emphasis on internal reading, exploring the words of the text, and giving the inconsistencies and hesitations full value.[2] This is not an Early Clue to deconstruction: it is New Criticism, and as such it was a form of resistance not to the

[1] I never met Adam Parry, and met Robert Brooks only once, shortly before his death. All the other American scholars mentioned in this note have been my friends and/or teachers.

[2] Note that this article is earlier than most of the scholarship that Johnson enrolls in the Harvard School. He does not, so far as I can see, cite Reckford, but as there is no index and no bibliography in *Darkness Visible*, I may be wrong.

"European" school of Virgilian criticism—except insofar as Viktor Pöschl's disingenuous post-Nazi self-rehabilitation did need a response—as to the dominant American academic style of biographical and historical criticism: a line of interpretation of the *Aeneid* with very respectable ancestry, as it goes back to Servius at least. And in terms of the study of literature, what Amherst and Harvard shared was the presence of Reuben A. Brower, Professor of Classics and English at Amherst, then from the mid-1950s Professor of English at Harvard: a friend, I know, of Clausen and Putnam, and I believe of Brooks too—and at least a colleague of Parry. Brower was an eloquent New Critic: his introductory book on literary criticism, *The Fields of Light* (1951), is one I still recommend to students teaching poetry for the first time. His book on Pope (1959) contains one of the best assessments of Horace's *Satires* that I know; his late book on Shakespeare, *Hero and Saint* (1971), was a major treatment of the Roman plays. He was also a great teacher. Through his famous freshman course on poetry, Humanities 6, he was a major influence on the many scholars of literature who were his teaching assistants, not to mention hundreds of undergraduates.

Brower is the first name to be mentioned. The second is more purely Harvard, J. P. Elder, another friend of Putnam and Brooks; he was an extremely influential teacher until he became Dean of the graduate school in 1955. Elder began as a medievalist and palaeographer, a student of E. K. Rand, but he became one of the first advocates of new-critical method in classics: his articles on Catullus in the late 1940s and early 1950s are, along with Bernard Knox's "The Serpent and the Flame" (1950), the true beginning of serious literary (rather than biographical or narrowly textual) study of Latin poetry in the U.S.

The final name to be mentioned is equally important as a New Critic of the classics, but his influence on the Harvard School is partly retroactive, although well before Johnson's invention. That is Steele Commager, whose anthology of criticism of Virgil in the series "Twentieth Century Views," edited by Maynard Mack, was published in 1966—and included the famous trio of Brooks, Clausen, and Parry as well as Knox's article. Indeed, as an example of Harvard School criticism as described by Johnson, there is nothing better than Commager's introduction to his volume. And it is worth noting that while Johnson refers to the Harvard School's "peculiarly contemporary brand of pessimism" requiring modern agnosticism or atheistic existentialism (15), Commager (13) quotes Cardinal Newman, no agnostic he, saying of Virgil that he gives "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."

What is new and different in the so-called Harvard School is not the pessimism—and it is only pessimistic in the sense that all these critics recognize that the world is imperfect, which I would call realistic—but the fact that the interpretation is arrived at from close reading rather than from historical explanation or universal truths. For the most part, when I teach the *Aeneid* now, I still find this kind of criticism useful, and indeed often right. I think of the doubleness of the poem as more epistemological than historical, but I rely heavily on what these great critics have seen. One friend of mine (also a student of Clausen) once denigrated "Interpretation" because it ended without stating just what Clausen thought the Gates *did* mean. But that is exactly right: Clausen opens the poem to uncertainty and doubt—Aeneas' doubts, and our own. Where he was wrong was not in what he said, but in not wanting to be remembered for it. "It is this perception of Roman history as a long Pyrrhic victory of the human spirit that makes Virgil his country's truest historian" (1964:146). A sentence like that needs to be remembered.

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