VERGIL’S THREE DOTS (I)

Not far from Naples lies the Cape of Palinuro. There, sometimes, the elements can be rough, even if the Tyrrhenian Sea is tranquil. While the light beacon on the coast cuts into the darkness regularly for a split second, helmsman Palinurus keeps watch on the bridge of a scouring galley. Behind him lies Carthago, where departure had lead to treachery and death of the sovereign. In front lies Latium, where soon the model of all usurption that history would know would be built. Treachery in Africa for the sake of the holy mission in Europe, divinely presented to admiral Aeneas. Fire was imminent. But now, on the waters, there was still time to reflect. On the bridge, the bows, by the mast, in the hold and at the stern by the helm, wherever on the ship he might be, he brooded and found in the corridors of his mind the inevitability of his desertion. Palinurus left ship...

This is a text that could only have been written **after** the 60s of the twentieth century. It is the opening paragraph of a review of *Palinuro* by Ole Bouman in *De Groene Amsterdammer*, December 1989, when in “Galerie René Coelho” *Palinuro* was exhibited for the first time. (Mind the dots.)

I. SPECULATION & INTERPRETATION

A. VIEWS ON THE AENEID 1900-1990

The modern era in the criticism of the *Aeneid* can truly be said to begin in the twentieth century. In 1903 two highly influential books were published in Germany: Richard Heinze's *Vergils epische Technik*, and Eduard Norden's commentary on *Aeneid* 6. (Book 6, the focal point of the *Aeneid* is about Aeneas’ *katabasis*, his descent and journey through the underworld.) In Heinze’s book Aeneas was seen as developing into the ideal Roman hero of Vergil's age, a Stoic disciple learning to follow the will of destiny, and the poem was a

sublime assertion of the might of Rome and Augustus. Norden agreed broadly with Heinze's approach.

After World War II, a more ambiguous appreciation of works emerged that appeared to celebrate military imperialism and absolute monarchical power. In 1950 two well-known examples of the application of this kind of literary ideas to the *Aeneid* appeared simultaneously on opposite sides of the Atlantic: Viktor Pöschl's *Die Dichtkunst Vergils (*subtitel *Bild und Symbol in der Aeneis*), later translated as *The Art of Vergil*, and Bernard Knox's article *'The Serpent and the Flame'*. Both explored Vergil's imagery in its symbolic aspects.

Pöschl used the symbolic interpretation of imagery to support earlier views of the *Aeneid* as an assertion of the fundamental values of Western civilization, seen as relevant to the post-war reconstruction of German society at the time he wrote: order and purpose overcome the forces of chaos and disintegration, but there is a humane pity for the victims in this battle. The most interesting consequence of Pöschl's work was its use to promote a general view of the *Aeneid* which was in most respects the opposite of his own.

This symbolic approach to the *Aeneid* was taken up by the so-called *Harvard School* of Vergilian critics in the USA, emerging perhaps in the 1950s and coming into their own in the mid-1960s. These critics tended to hold that the poem presented a pessimistic view alongside the surface glory of Aeneas and Rome, 'a public voice of triumph and a private voice of regret'. The dark side of political success and the cost of imperialism, a cost felt by victor as well as victim, was the essential message - the plot of the *Aeneid* is 'a long history of defeat and loss'.

In the 1960s and early 1970s Germans continued to produce books that supported the positive view of the *Aeneid.* Despite the firm and influential positive views still emanating from Germany, Anglophone scholarship on the *Aeneid* in the 1960s and 70s largely inclined towards the American pessimism of the *Harvard School*.

The doubt of the traditional view of the *Aeneid* has at least some connection with the questioning in the 1960s of all institutions, political, religious, and intellectual, and in particular with attitudes towards America's own imperialism. Details such as the initial non-compliance of the Golden Bough or the vague nature of the Gates of Sleep were taken to show that the poet had doubts about Aeneas' mission and the imperial future of Rome.

Since then this ambiguous and pessimistic view of the *Aeneid* has been highly influential, especially (but not exclusively) in its country of origin (America). The more positive view of the *Aeneid* taken by Pöschl did not die out; it was understandably widespread in Germany. But there was also a moderation, a *softening* within the two opposite views:

- *following the negative (Harvard) school:* still a tension between the 'public voice' and 'private voice' of the poem, but now <u>avoiding the views of some of its more extreme advocates</u> on existential pessimism and the removal of the divine element from its essential role in the poem;
- *following the positive (German) school:* though the *Aeneid* did indeed celebrate the victories of Aeneas, Rome, and Augustus, it also expressed sympathy with the sufferings of both victor and victims. <u>Vergil the musingly melancholic</u> - a picture which has continued to appeal to many British scholars.

An interesting development of the pessimistic view of the *Aeneid* was seen in W. R. Johnson's *Darkness Visible*, published in 1976. Reacting against both the 'Harvard School' and the traditional 'positivists', Johnson put emphasis on the disturbing aspects of the divine dimension: the destructive and malevolent Juno is elevated into the central figure of the poem, and even Jupiter, so often claimed as the providential dispenser of destiny, is made to be darkly irrational. This sophisticated and powerful reading of the poem, reintroducing the cosmic and divine aspect of the poem emphasized by the Germans but comparatively neglected by the 'Harvard School' and using it to form a profoundly pessimistic interpretation, constitutes the most extreme opposition to the traditional positive view; it has found a number of admirers in the 1980s.

1980s. Different interpretations of the poem in the 1980s show, that there is no consensus about its meaning or fundamental ideology. This might be regarded as undesirable. When dealing with great poetry, however, greater technical knowledge does not necessarily lead to unanimity or certainty on central issues, and <u>the volume and variety of recent criticism is a tribute to the continuing literary interest and stature of the *Aeneid*</u>.

(Based on: S.I. HARRISON - Some Views of the Aeneid in the Twentieth Century; in Oxford Readings in Vergil's Aeneid, 1990.)

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The survey of scholarship on the 'Aeneid' in the twentieth century by S.I.Harrison ended in 1990, the year also that it was published and that I read it. It showed the many advances made in that century, but also that there was no consensus about the meaning or fundamental ideology of the 'Aeneid', with barricades separating optimists from pessimists. (My sympathy is more, although not completely, with the pessimist reading, as my explanation from 1990 about the relationship between my video works 'Palinuro' and 'Miseno' showed.

After 'Miseno' (my second Vergilian video work, created in 1990) I focussed my attention on Greek antiquity - Hesiod, the bronze age of the Mycenaean period, and on antique Asia Minor. So my knowledge about scholarship on the 'Aeneid' ended with Harrison's 'Oxford Readings in Vergil's Aeneid'.

*Although some articles of that book are still essential readings (see article below), it was high time - not only for our digital cross-departmental project **'Palinurus in digital operatic shorts'** but also for myself - to pick up the reception of the 'Aeneid' since 1991.*

For now I make a short summary of an article by Helen Slaney: 'Recent work on Virgil's Aeneid Book 6', from 2009, albeit with three restrictions. It is only about works published between 1990 and 2009. It includes only scholarship in English. And it is not an impartial document. Slaney: 'I believe scholarly rigour can only be improved by dropping the pretence of objectivity in favour of a more involved, self-reflexive approach.' Maybe not utterly correct for a scholar, but in my opinion for an artist a conditio sine qua non.

B. VIEWS ON THE AENEID AFTER 1990

Although the debate **Europe versus Harvard** can no longer be called current in any meaningful sense, it's still essential to any interpretation of the *Aeneid* and continues to haunt the scholarship. It's also becoming an object of study in its own right. Various terms have been coined to classify the two extreme positions on the spectrum of reading the *Aeneid*. The

most common terms are optimistic/pessimistic; European/Harvard; objective/subjective; Augustan/anti-Augustan; and imperialist/pacifist.

The *Aeneid*'s (re)politicization in the latter half of the twentieth century has been recognized as springing from a *zeitgeist* hostile to European totalitarianism and US imperialism, and from a new academic suspicion of myths constructed to protect power. Now, to suit a more polycentric world, the *Aeneid* has acquired some new buzz-words: polyvalence, polysemy, heterogeneity, openness, plurality, relativism, indeterminacy, ambiguity, ambivalence, dynamism. Rather than mounting a specific ideological soapbox, Virgil's poem presents its readers with concentrated conflicts of interest, or multiple points of view that cannot be reconciled. The roots of this kind of character-based or, alternatively, individual-against-fate dialectic may be traced back to Greek tragedy. (Hardie, 1998; Tarrant, 1997; Conte, 2007; Harrison, 2007.)

Of course, residual common-sense conservatives are still exchanging volleys with hard-core radicals. Conte's *Poetry of Pathos* (2007) provides probably the best current text-based argument for the *Aeneid* as "polycentric". In his introduction to Conte's study, Harrison confirms that the once-formidable barricades separating optimists from pessimists have 'fortunately broken down.'

But what stays is that it is not possible to read the *Aeneid* without negotiating its relationship to Augustus. So **the urge to redefine the Augustan context** remains.

The countercultural revolution of the 1960s allowed – so to speak - Virgil to break away and shatter his epic with voices that spoke for the oppositional and the oppressed. This reading became increasingly popular into the 1990s, when new work on the Augustan regime and its "cultural program" began to challenge the individual dominance of Augustus, assigning a more active role to artists in constructing and/or deconstructing "Augustus" as a concept.

However: since the Augustan political structure and accompanying culture did not pre-exist when Virgil was writing the *Aeneid*, but was still in the process of formulation, it doesn't make sense to talk about Virgil's opposition to or support for a "program" that had not yet cohered. Rather, current scholarship leans towards investigating how the *Aeneid* contributed to an ongoing negotiation of Augustan authority - and to the rewriting of Roman history.

Virgil participated in fashioning an image of archaic Rome that cast the Augustan present as restorative, not revolutionary. And most recently - the article I use was written in 2009 - the constructivist reading of Augustan Rome has led critics to interrogate in addition the *modern*

political significance of claiming Virgil for the rebels or the partisans.

Regarding the **work that's been done on *Aeneid VI*** since the 1990s: the irresistibly enigmatic *Gates of Sleep* are still spawning interpretations and everyone agrees that Book VI - in my and some others opinion initiated by the loss of Palinurus at the end of book V - is the centerpiece, even though there is yet no agreement on what that might actually mean.
It should be noted that for book VI two articles and a book – although a little outside our survey period after 1990 - are still great sources for starting the exploration of Virgil's Underworld.

(1) Zetzel's article *'Romane memento: justice and judgment in Aeneid 6'* (1989) locates the book at the turning point of 'the end of one *saeculum* and the beginning of another', linking its Sibylline and Mystery-cult rituals to the ceremonies performed in 17 BC at Augustus' *Ludi Saeculares* - a Roman religious celebration involving sacrifices and theatrical performances, held in Rome for three days and nights to mark the end of a saeculum and the beginning of the next. The double, incompatible visions of the afterlife in book VI - primeval (and mythical, almost Homeric) Tartarus versus the (more philosophical) neo-Platonic transmigration of souls *(ndk)* - can thus be related to a Rome where bloody vendettas are giving way to an ideology of cyclic renewal. It is interesting to compare Zetsel's article to Solmsen's more traditional *structuralist* article about the world of the dead in Book VI of the Aeneid from 1972, reprinted in Harrison in 1990.
(2) R.D. Williams' *'The sixth book of the Aeneid'*, first published in 1964 but reprinted in Harrison (1990), is still essential reading: it lucidly introduces *the psychoanalytic aspect* of Aeneas' *katabasis*, defining it as a confrontation and reconciliation with his own past and future.
(3) The parade of heroes receives its most accessible critique in O'Hara's book *'Death and the Optimistic Prophecy in Virgil's Aeneid'* (1990: 163-72). Not Helen Slay but M.J.Mattes in a note, quoting page 172: 'close reading of Virgil's prophecies shows his painful awareness – which the shrewd Augustus may have shared – that this could be just an illusion, just a fantasy, …just a false dream (referring clearly to the gate from Hades)'.

With this we come back where Slay arrives with some trepidation at the Gates of Sleep. It's now generally accepted that Yes, Virgil really *did* mean *falsa insomnia*, and Yes, this *does* make Anchises' prophecy seem just a tad dodgy. The most sensible treatment of the subject

(Molyviati-Toptsis, 1995) concludes that 'the *falsa insomnia* are an authorial comment on the deceptive quality of Anchises' speech' and its selective representation of Roman history. This article avoids falling back on the rather strained Neo-Platonic solutions proposed by Tarrant, West (both reprinted in Harrison 1990). Instead, she follows O'Hara in acknowledging Virgil's emphasis on the fallibility of artistic and/or prophetic representation. Nevertheless she recommends West's 'The bough and the gate', (which I - *ndk* - have used several times) because it's so ruthless and merciless towards some of the wackier explanations for the Gate and the Golden Bough. (Maybe the reason that it was such a source of inspiration for me.)

Melancholy has been recognized as a defining feature of the *Aeneid* ever since the eighteenth century, but has only recently acquired political overtones. Persistent intimations of loss, the beauty of doomed youth, and one of Western literature's most lachrymose heroes have consistently appealed to those readers for whom imperial glory rings false. Grandsen (2004) defines Virgilian melancholy as

> *a sense of the unrealized, of words not spoken, of things not enacted, of a world in which, perhaps, Aeneas stayed at Carthage, Evander did not lose his son, Turnus was spared, Marcellus survived to succeed Augustus.*

Such wistful musings take sharper shape in a book in 2007: Conte's *The Poetry of Pathos*. To what extent these individual subjectivities, these "further voices" (Lyne, 1987), represent opposition to a dominant discourse is still a hot topic, or at least still smoking. The debate over how exactly poetics and politics, language and power intersect certainly hasn't burnt out yet.

Of particular concern is the creative process involved in a work of art and, as Casali (2007) argues, the (compromised?) integrity of the artist. Prophecy, too, is always delivered by characters whose individual interests must be taken into account; to apply a narratological approach, the speaker's identity is just as important as what he or she says. And politicized: discrepancies in the future/s depicted by Jupiter, Vulcan, and in Book VI by Anchises and the Sibyl have been read as illustrating the deceptiveness of *Fama* and - by analogy - the deceptiveness of epic glamour itself.

In narratological terms: it is vital to determine who has ultimate authority over the text. The speaker? the poet? the emperor? Or, could the question of who is listening be just as important

as the question of who is speaking?

Both readings, the optimist-imperialist and the pessimist-subversive, can be extrapolated from the text. Scholarship is therefore currently concerned with the utility these readings have found among the powerful, the revolutionary, the nostalgic and/or the dispossessed.

Conclusions… If you rearrange the bibliography by date of publication, you'll notice that after the *annus mirabilis* that was 1993, the stream of material on Virgil starts drying up. (Distressed? Or relieved?) Slaney finishes her survey with a pronouncement made in 2001 by Joseph Farrell that might stir things up a bit:

> *The period of Vergilian hegemony is over… We have already entered a period during which Vergil is no longer the single most important paradigm in Latin literary studies, when the questions that we most want to answer are not Vergilian ones.*

It is hard now for novelists or poets to approach the *Aeneid* as a source-text without a degree of parody, irony or at least cynical disillusionment. Classical scholarship runs in cycles. Until the late nineteenth century, nobody paid any attention to the *Aeneid* unless it was to express a preference for Homer. The twentieth century wrung the controversy it so passionately desired out of Virgil's epic, but perhaps Farrell is right, and we could now be moving into a period where other Classical texts - formerly marginal - speak more eloquently to our condition.

Does that mean we should stop reading the *Aeneid*? Slaney doesn't think so. It is an endlessly rich and rewarding text, and has exercised unparalleled influence over the imagination of Western Europe. What it does mean is that we can't take its presence for granted. Having acknowledged its fragility and contingency, and our own contribution to its status, we are required to keep asking the questions with which this survey commenced: why are we reading it? What is it for? What do we need from Virgil here and now?

Based on an article by Helen Slaney from 2009