

VERGIL'S THREE DOTS (II)

As M.J.Mattes once said 'Interpreters of the Aeneid do not agree on much, but they will agree that this poem has been fundamentally misinterpreted by more people than any other poem in history. In reading a range of critical writings on the poem, it is hard to believe that everyone is writing about the same work.' (These words are the beginning of his essay Is the Aeneid a Trojan Horse?, published last year, 2020). It is in all respects a very speculative, even provocative paper. But, let us say, also very funny and a good paper to decide on your own position. The paper can easily be found on internet.)

II. SPECULATION & INSPIRATION

THE AMBIGUITY OF FREEDOM AND FATE

It is true: we have to admit that the *Aeneid* is a very ambiguous work. But don't forget: the epos is a poem, a work of art, not a poetic treatise or a manifesto with a one-directional message. Virgil accomplished the assignment as a poet and not as a propagandist or bootlicker. And that was not without risk for his own life (he could be executed for that), but in my opinion: this is not the main reason for the ambiguity of the work.

First of all there is the question if not all good poetry is apt to be ambiguous. E.M. Preston starts her thesis *Moral Ambiguity in Vergil's Aeneid* (1969) with this question. She continues with a quote of William Epton with which I do not entirely agree, but I do with the following phrase of this quote:

in great poetry (...) there is always an appeal to a background of human experience which is all the more present when it cannot be named.

She also quotes Jackson Knight:

Poetry might almost be defined as method by which truth can be reached and expressed even when it involves contradictions.

Preston also says:

Vergil presents to us in the Aeneid the ambivalent nature of the human animal in his eternal predicament striving to fulfil himself as an individual for psychological survival and at the same time to preserve himself as a social being in an organized society.

In conclusion: The *Aeneid* is also a work about the fundamental relation between man and freedom. Preston again:

It is impossible to talk of freedom without reference to some fixed standard with respect to which or in spite of which man realizes positive freedom or abnegates it.

In the *Aeneid* this standard is *Fate*, so the *Aeneid* is also a work about the interrelation of freedom and fate. In this context Preston quotes: ‘The *Aeneid* in fact is the story of the interplay between the cosmic power of fate and human response to it.’ (*Phrase by Brooks Otis*)

THE AMBIGUITY OF INSPIRATION AS FORTUNATE FATE

The question is if all this scholarship we have read about in part one and in the beginning of this part, scholarship also with that whole range of different interpretations, concepts, ideas, inventions, and preconceived opinions —, well: did I need all this knowledge for making my video-installation *Palinuro*? Or in other words: have all this scholarship and concomitant speculations also been my source of inspiration for this work?

The answer is no. I started my examinations on the reception of Vergil’s *Aeneid* just *after* the completion of the work.

I completed *Palinuro* at the end of the summer in 1989. During the postproduction of it I got the idea of making a *pendant* - a video-installation as a counterpart to *Palinuro*, which became the video-installation *Miseno*. The reason why, can be read in the explanatory piece in the *Palinuro*’s box, with the title *About the Relationship Palinuro & Miseno*.

When I started my Palinuro-project in 1988 (the work plan was made in June 88) my knowledge about the interpretation of the *Aeneid* consisted only of the speculations of Connolly from 1944 in the epilogue of his book *The Unquiet Grave (Who was Palinurus?)* and a note by Connolly himself in that book, with a quote of Jackson Knight from 1936 and in the same note a remark and *suggestion* towards a more pessimistic interpretation of the *Aeneid*.

Reading again the survey by Harrison for our Palinurus project, I realized that my two inspirators - Connolly and Jackson Knight - were not mentioned in it. And also not in Slaney's survey, but this article was about the period far after World War II. (Maybe, or better said: I am convinced that for making *Palinuro* this was an advantage, as I could intuitively identify myself with Palinurus and partially also with Connolly.)

So the pessimistic speculation from my side was already there when I started to make *Palinuro*, but mainly related only to Connolly's view of Palinurus' desertion - as a consequence of my self-identification with Connolly and by extension also with Palinurus.

Connolly - at the end of his epilogue *Who was Palinurus?* writes:

Whether he deliberately tried to abandon Aeneas, whether he was the innocent victim of divine vengeance or a melancholy and resentful character who felt his special nautical gift was soon to become unwanted cannot be deduced from the evidence. His bluff sailor's manner may belie his real state of mind. I am inclined to rule out both suicide (there are no symptoms comparable to those of Dido when she felt all nature prompting her to the deed) and accident, for the sterns of ships do not fall off in calm seas. We are left, therefore, with design—a planned act of escape and revenge by Palinurus—or with supernatural intervention, in the shape of a propitiatory sacrifice of the Pilot to Juno, who might otherwise have prevented the safe arrival of Aeneas and his whole expedition.

Which of these alternatives we accept is in the last analysis, a question of the claims of reason versus those of revealed religion. As a myth, however, and particularly as a myth with a valuable psychological interpretation, Palinurus dearly stands for a certain will-to-failure or repugnance-to-success, a desire to give up at the last moment, an urge towards loneliness, isolation and obscurity.

So there are, inspired by Connolly, various inspiring and exciting reasons for Palinurus' disappearance. The last one - Palinurus' will-to-failure - is, I think, a very particular, private reason of Connolly himself.

But then, the before last note in *The Unquiet Grave* by Connolly:

'Virgil knew the cost of Empire; the cost in suffering, and the cost to conscience and to so many graceful things. That he knew the cost his poem shows so clearly that it has lately been thought to be a savage attack on Augustus and autocracy.' — W.J. KNIGHT, *op. cit.* (*Cumaean Gates*) p. 168.

And after that - in the same note:

The Palinurus passages are so charged with haunting images and golden cadences as to suggest that Virgil has identified himself with his pilot (as did Milton with Orpheus). Both poets reflect their unconscious death-wish. Palinurus: Aeneas: Virgil: Augustus.

Please note: *reflect* - reflection as psychological projections of the mind - in the video-installation *Palinuro* the main visual concept. Accomplished by the secondary layers of images mixed in the scenic main-image of the sea by night and the revolving beams of the lighthouses — the first one that of Cuma, the second one that of Velia.

Virgil identifying himself with his pilot: I think it is safe to say that the pessimism of the *Aeneid* is not *hidden* in the work as the result of a covert plan. The only thing you can say about it is, in my opinion, that the pessimistic view was not preconceived when Vergil accepted the commission to write the epos. And that he, while he was writing, may have gradually developed an antipathy to the gods and to the half god who was the protagonist and main character of the epos and by extension also to Augustus - emperor and a *nouveau* god - who commissioned him to write the *Aeneid*.

That's what it was, my view on the *Aeneid*, when I was working on *Palinuro* from October 1988 till October 1989. My reading up on the *scholarship* on the *Aeneid* began shortly after finishing the work and I started my work plan of *Miseno* the same month: October 1989. The drive for *Miseno* was that I wanted to use *the other side* of all the visual material I had collect

for the secondary layers of images of *Palinuro*. Mostly documentaries, sometimes newsreels, from which I had used only the more *lyrical* images - *the passionated forces of nature* (Pöschl) - while mostly the subject of those documentaries and newsreels were showing the most horrible aspects and problems of modern civilization of that time. Again: it goes too far to go further on this subject now, so read the explanatory piece in the *Palinuro*'s box, with the title *About the Relationship Palinuro & Miseno*.

However, this knowledge - Connolly's epilogue and his quote from Jackson Knight - I already had in the beginning of 1983; I bought the Dutch translation of *The Unquiet Grave* shortly after my return from Venice in December 1982 - as I have told you during my earlier presentation.

So what was the sparkling, electrifying element, the spontaneous, unforeseen invention, that inspired me to the concept of *Palinuro* five years later. So out of the blue...

I think inspiration is for the biggest part a question of a good match between bad or good luck and coincidence and chance. And a good dose of *melancholia* in your inner life.

First the bad luck. In 1988 - after finishing my first video installation *Bulicame* - I wanted to visit the village *Palinuro* in South Italy at the end of a study tour and location research for a subsequent video installation about Dante's deepest point in hell. (*Bulicame* was also a work situated in the *Inferno* - Dante's own underworld, inspired by the Greek and Roman concept of the underworld.) Because Vergil was Dante's mentor and guide during Dante's *katabasis*, I had already read the *Aeneid* in the period before making *Bulicame*, when I was painting a series of paintings for an installation about the seventh circle of Dante's hell. Because of the new Dante-project, named *installation Dis*, I was interested in the region around Naples, the region with the entrance to the antique Greek and Roman underworld.

Back home I realized that I had failed to visit the village *Palinuro*. I consulted my Guide Bleu to see what I had missed. Only a very short description, just six lines: seaside resort, fishing village, etcetera - nothing about Aeneas' unfortunate helmsman, only a glimpse in the second line: 'situé à proximité du cap du même nom que couronne un phare et un obélisque de 1828'. (Next to a cape, crowned by a lighthouse and an obelisk from 1828).

I immediately stopped reading - in a split second I saw in my mind the revolving light beams of the lighthouse at night and Connolly's lonely *Palinurus* (or was it lonely Connolly, Vergil, myself?) sitting on the stern of his ship, reflecting while he was looking at the beams... (To the sea cave, mentioned in line 5, I did not pay attention. That came in 2009, when I visited by

boat the cave in the context of my location research for *The C of Scylla*, the web opera version of my continuing *Palinuro* project; 21 years later.

So: inspiration in this case as a coincidence of bad luck (forgotten to...), good luck (to have a guide with just a very short description) and an unintentional melancholic remembrance.

The melancholy I refer to is not the pessimistic or romantic kind of melancholy implied in the common use of that word, but rather the mood that runs brilliantly through Connolly's and also at a certain level through Vergil's books.

In Connolly's work: "Jusqu'au sombre plaisir d'un coeur mélancolique: a sense of perfection and a faith in human dignity, combined with a tragic apprehending of our mortal situation, and our nearness to the Abyss."

In Vergil's work: read the end of book V of the *Aeneid*, when the god of Sleep brandishes a twig dipped in the Lethe and the Styx above the head of Palinurus. And *fortuna*, both in its positive and negative sense, becomes *fate*.

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PRELIMINARY FINDINGS / TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS

ONE.

Helen Slaney finished her survey of the views on the *Aeneid* after 1990 with a pronouncement made in 2001 by Joseph Farrell:

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 (...) to our condition.

Does that mean we should stop reading the *Aeneid*? Slaney doesn't think so. (And so do I. *ndk*) 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 at the end of the first part (about interpretation) of my lecture: why are we reading it? What is it for? What do we need from Virgil here and now?

TWO.

The previous part of my lecture (about inspiration) was about human freedom and society and human freedom and fate as two important elements in the content of Vergil's *Aeneid*. I decided that it is not the place this morning to discuss deeply the interaction of human freedom and fate. Probably it is better to express your *private* thoughts and feelings about that in the content of your own creative work and that we save this issue for another time.

What we can do is to keep in mind the *Vergilian* vision of the interaction of human freedom and fate as a worthy paradigm. The Greek equivalent of the Roman goddess Fortuna was Tyche, the goddess of luck and bad luck, and of fate as destiny and not necessarily as doom. And also - in the words of Eileen Preston at the end of the introduction to her thesis - the 'swing between freedom and authority' which is 'constant in history' as 'a tension' 'illustrated in the *Aeneid*' as 'reflecting the conditions of Vergil's age'.

However: in the context of the optimistic, positive view of the *Aeneid* and the pessimistic, negative view as well, it is always about the *Western* civilization as - positive - ideal standard or - negative - as imperialistic usurpator. The fact that our era now is one of globalization, post-colonialism, migration and more awareness of racism - an era also with new dominant parties - must have consequences for our view on the *Aeneid* as a paradigm for civilization, in case we want to stick to this aspect of the *Aeneid*. (As an allusion to the video of Sjaron Minailo's piece *Retrotopia*, which he will show later this morning: don't forget that Augustus' design of his Roman utopia actually was a retrotopia: the nostalgic reversion of the primordial golden age of Saturnus.)

This is in line with one of the issues of the *open call* for the project we are working on: the subject of historicization. I hope not only as a starting point for a more *theoretical* elaboration of issues as post-humanism, new materialism or afro-futurism, but most of all as a hidden

message of your private, personal engagement with these issues in the work you are working on.

Lastly - THREE.

What about Vergil's three dots - the title of this lecture?

There are a lot of unfinished lines in the verses of the *Aeneid*. It is generally assumed that Vergil wanted to complete these lines later; the work was unfinished when he died.

There is only one, short verse with - out of rhythm - a dash at the end. In translations not a dash but three dots.

It is at the end of the procession of the future heroes of Rome, shown by Aeneas' father to him during Aeneas' journey in the underworld. It is there that Aeneas' father is not describing the heroes to Aeneas, but that he addresses the (future [!?!]) ghosts. He speaks especially to Caesar - direct descendant of Aeneas father and, like Aeneas himself, of the Olympian goddess Venus. I remind you that Augustus - adopted son of Caesar - when he commissioned the epos for the glorification of his own emperorship and *his* Roman civilization, he wanted the myth of Aeneas as the subject of it. To legitimize his own so-called *divine* origin.

The verse with the three dots and previous verse (VI 834-35) are as follows:

You be the first to halt, you who derive your race from heaven:

Hurl the sword from your hand, who are of my blood...

Or more precisely translated, although in prose:

And you, who are of my own blood and trace your descent from Olympus, you should be first in clemency, you should first fling your weapons from your hands...

(These two translations - the second one by W.F. Jackson Knight - put in fact an exclamation mark at the end of verse 835, where the Latin verse has an exclamation mark and a dash. C. Day Lewis, the poet laureate, who did my favorite translation in English, places an exclamation mark and three dots.)

So what is it the *Aeneid*? Positive? Negative? Haughty? Impartial? And what about the fact that in book V, when the Trojans have left Sicily and Palinurus leads the convoy, the verses with the same numbers are as follows:

834: *For the rest (of the convoy) had been ordered to set their course to him.*

835: *By now Night with her moist air had nearly reached her point of turning in the sky*

and the story of Palinurus begins...