

Virgil's *Aeneid*: Listening for the Voices



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The "Two Voices."

What was Virgil's purpose in writing the *Aeneid*? To celebrate the greatness of Rome and to glorify Augustus as the culmination of Roman History? This has been a traditional view. And it is certainly part of the story.

In the past generation, other readers, have heard another — equally strong, or even stronger — "voice" in the poem.¹ Wendell Clausen, for example, said that "it is [the poem's] perception of Roman history as a long Pyrrhic victory of the human spirit that makes Virgil his country's truest historian."² In this reading — that of the so-called "Harvard School" — Virgil had serious misgivings about Augustus and about Rome's rise to world domination; and these misgivings are apparent in his telling of the story of a victory that was as costly for the winners as for the losers.³

The middle or "two voices" position (the majority reading now, I think, and the one that appeals most to me) was well put by R. D. Williams who argued that one of Virgil's main themes is an exploration of the "powerful tension between the primary subject of the poem, Rome's greatness, and the pathos of human suffering which exists in spite of, or even because of, Rome's greatness" — between an optimistic "public voice" and another, pessimistic "private voice, expressing deep con-

¹Adam Parry, "The Two Voices of Virgil's *Aeneid*," *Arion* Vol. 2 (1963) pp. 107-23.

²Wendell Clausen, "An Interpretation of the *Aeneid*," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, Vol. 68 (1964) pp. 139-47.

³Michael Putnam has been perhaps the best known writer in the Harvard School tradition. See his *The Poetry of the Aeneid*, 2nd ed. (1st ed. 1965), (Ithaca and London, 1988) and *Virgil's Aeneid: Interpretation and Influence* (Chapel Hill and London, 1995).

cern for the lonely individual who does not fit into these cosmic schemes.”⁴ In this view, the Roman world power was undeniably a grand achievement, a mission of peace and civilization, decreed by fate and willed by the gods. “At another level,” as Jasper Griffin puts it, “the cost of imperialism is high . . . [and] Virgil’s remonstrance at this harshness seems to . . . become a plea, poignantly unanswered, against the logic of imperialism itself.”⁵

If Virgil was not an uncritical advocate of Augustus and Rome, neither was he simply a denouncer of war and imperialism. I think that he tried to see — that he personally felt — the issues from both sides. The result is what Griffin has described as a kind of “calculated ambiguity” in the telling of the story which has produced “a work of inexhaustible inwardness, the greatest of all achievements of the creative mind of Rome, and the truest interpretation of her history.”⁶

No one denies the strong note of pathos in the *Aeneid*. What might be called the optimistic modern interpretation sees Virgil’s ultimate view as, “Yes, it was hard and costly, but on balance it was worth it. Great achievements involve great costs.”⁷ The pessimists wonder if Virgil *did* think it was “worth it” after all.

⁴R. D. Williams, *The Aeneid of Virgil*, 2 vols. (London, 1973), vol. 1, xx-xxi.

⁵Jasper Griffin, *Virgil* (Oxford and New York, 1986) 79.

⁶Even someone as basically “optimistic” as W. A. Camps leaves room for the middle position. On the one hand he maintains that:

The idea of Rome is thus the dominant value in the *Aeneid* and the primary motive of its action; and many readers . . . have been willing enough to accept this, and to find in the poem an expression not only of a man’s feeling for his country, but also of the high role Rome has indeed had in history as an organizing and harmonizing and humanizing agency.

On the other hand, Camps recognizes it is characteristic of great and sensitive poets to tell more truths than they know. And so he concludes — somewhat patronizingly as it seems to me — that:

In a world no longer sympathetic to empires some may prefer to reflect that the motive of a poem is only one of its constituents, and not always the most important . . . And so with the *Aeneid*, those who cannot enter with sympathy into Virgil’s conception of Rome may find the meaning of his poem for themselves in its complementary theme, the impact of world forces and world movements on the lives of individuals and the human qualities displayed in their response (W. A. Camps, *An Introduction to Virgil’s Aeneid*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 110).

⁷Donatus, the fourth century A.D. commentator, put it neatly, *Magna enim sine magno labore condi non possunt* (“For great things cannot be founded without great labor.”). Cited by R. D. Williams, *Aeneid*, p. 161.

About Reading

Critics of the pessimistic "Harvard School" of reading the *Aeneid* are wont to trace its origins to American soul-searching during the Vietnam era. For example, S. J. Harrison says that

for an outside observer it is difficult to separate such an interpretation from the characteristic concerns of US (and other) intellectuals in these years: the doubt of the traditional view of the *Aeneid* has at least some connection with the 1960s questioning of all institutions, political, religious, and intellectual, and in particular with attitudes towards America's own imperialism.⁸

Robert Fitzgerald, one of the greatest *Aeneid* translators (also a Harvard man), takes the story back a bit earlier than the 1960s. In describing his own history of reading the poem, he tells of struggling from construction to construction as a schoolboy, of discovering the poem's narrative power in his late twenties and finally of reading the whole twelve books straight through in Latin at age 35 in the Pacific in 1945. At the time, he was an officer stationed on a quiet island, fighting boredom and waiting for the war to end. He describes, with the eye and ear of a poet, how his personal experience and his reading conspired to open him to the ambiguities of war and empire.

There we were on our island in our fresh khakis, laundered and pressed, the little bars gleaming on our collars and caps, saluting the old admiral with his snowy Roman head ... The scene could not have been more imperial or more civilized We played tennis, skipped rope and worked out on the heavy bag. At night at my neat desk ... I read Virgil by the light of a good lamp. I heard young submarine skippers, the finest Annapolis products, give their light-hearted accounts of shelling poor junks to smithereens ... Meanwhile ... picket ships were having their prows or upperworks and the men who manned them smashed into flaming junk by Japanese fighters aflame; ashore, men with flamethrowers were doing

⁸S. J. Harrison, ed. *Oxford Readings in Vergil's Aeneid* (Oxford and New York, 1990), p. 5. A fine, up-to-date collection of essays by various scholars. See, too, the more recent collection of Charles Martindale, ed. *Cambridge Companion to Virgil* (Cambridge, 1997). Also recommended is Harold Bloom, ed. *Virgil's Aeneid: Modern Critical Interpretations* (Chelsea House: New York, 1987).

what I had heard a briefing officer in San Francisco, with an insane giggle, refer to as “popping Japs”; and a good many young and brave of both sides were tasting the agony and abomination that the whole show came down to, in fact existed for. The next landings would be on Honshu, and I would be there. More than literary interest, I think, kept me reading Virgil’s descriptions of desperate battle, funeral pyres, failed hopes of truce or peace.⁹

I cannot recall as vividly as Fitzgerald does just when I began to catch on to this way of reading the *Aeneid*. I am sure, however, that it was also in relation to personal questions — though less immediately pressing ones than his — provoked by thinking about America’s dominant role in the world since World War II: the pluses, the minuses, and how to think about them and my own complicity in them.

I spent the 1960s as a graduate student between (still basically) pre-Vietnam Harvard (1960-4), and Cold War Germany (1964-8), with its still huge, 400,000 troop, American military presence. This latter awakened me to the question of American power and its uses in the world. Though I was ambivalent, on balance, it seemed a good thing. My college teaching career began in the late 1960s on a US college campus (Boston College) during the Vietnam war, when (like most people I knew) I tilted decidedly in a “pessimist” direction.

In the 1980s and early 1990s Central America became a chief focus of US foreign policy. I got involved through the Jesuits whom I had known in Germany in the 1960s. Central America and the US imperium. (In some circles they still refer to the US ambassador as the “pro-consul.”) It was the era of Nicaragua, the Contras, and the Kissinger doctrine: If we can’t control our own back yard (Nicaragua), then the whole grand strategic scheme may fall apart. In 1989 six of my fellow Jesuits were assassinated in cold blood at the University of Central America in San Salvador by members of the élite, US-trained and supported Atlacatl battallion. Some were personal friends and all were victims, I still think, of the Pax Americana. More pessimism and less ambivalence for me.

Now in the late 1990s the Cold War is over and the US is “the last superpower.” A new situation. the age of NAFTA, GATT, free trade, and

⁹*The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (Random House: New York, 1990) p. 414.

neo-liberalism — all guaranteed by US military and economic power and all “good — or at least the best we can think to do — for everyone.”

Two recent personal experiences of mine may help to illustrate the “optimistic” and the “pessimistic” views of the present situation. The first was Ross Perot’s speech at his Reform Party convention in late September. His refrain was, “We (US) are great because we are good.” Thanks to the struggles and good morals (especially good family values — *pietas*) of those who have gone before — from the first settlers to the soldiers in Korea and Vietnam — all together, no distinctions. Nowadays we Americans have it easy by comparison, but we still need to be on guard. If we stop being good — as we are in danger of doing — we shall stop being great. Then what? Mr. Perot did not elaborate further.

I had what I consider a more Virgilian view of the world in May (1998) during a visit to El Salvador with a group of BC students. The moment that most remains with me was a meeting with two young women, leaders of COMUTRES (*Comite de mujeres trabajadoras de El Salvador*), a labor union for women (a life-threatening job just a few years ago) who work in *maquilas* (factories which assemble clothing and athletic gear for NIKE, GAP, and the like, with materials shipped from the US). Pay is low (US\$4.00 per day); working and living conditions are harsh, but there is no other work. One of the students asked, “What can we do for you? Shall we boycott NIKE and GAP?” The younger (23) of the two women smiled wearily and said, “Thank you for asking. Everyone does. But you have to make up your own mind. The only thing I ask is that, if you do buy the things we make, just think of us when you do.” What to do? What to think? What to feel? Then what? These seem to me to be the types of questions that Virgil had in mind in the *Aeneid*.

Even an optimistic reading of the *Aeneid* involves the suppositions that for Virgil extreme violence can somehow be ultimately justified in pursuit of higher ends (peace and good order), that some people have a right to dominate others (for the latter’s own good), and that for some, perhaps ultimately unfathomable, reason, this is the way it has to be, for the gods and fate — in modern terms, human nature, historical processes, and the like — have decreed it so.

Reading the poem this time, I think I hear a “voice” that speaks of hope for better days mixed with concern — based on previous Roman

history (including Augustus's own) and human nature — that it was a fragile hope. We need to keep in mind that Virgil lived for fifty-one years. Twenty-nine of those were war years, and of those, sixteen were years of civil war. He *may* have lost his father's farm in the confiscations of 42 B.C. He *must* have known personally many of the victims of that and later civil strife. We should also remember that Virgil (b. 70) died in 19 B.C. and started the *Aeneid* ten years earlier in 29 B.C., long before the promise of Augustus was a sure thing. As Philip Hardie says, all of Virgil's work shows "a strong sense of being located at a critical point in history, and ... an equally strong sense of the exposed position of the individual subject within the historical process."¹⁰

Some Examples

I have chosen three of many possible examples, taken from three key moments in the story, to illustrate some of the ways in which Virgil raises questions for me: from the Prologue to the introduction of Dido and some later references to her; from the end of Book 6, where Aeneas leaves the underworld through the ivory gate of false dreams; and from the end of Book 12, where Aeneas kills the helpless Turnus.

I. CARTHAGE, DIDO, AND OTHER VICTIMS

The Prologue sets the theme and begins the questioning:

Arms and the man I sing, who first from Trojan shores, fate driven, came to Italy ... Much was he tossed on land and sea, by force of gods, for fierce Juno's unrelenting wrath. And many things he suffered too in war, 'til he could found his city and bring his gods to Latium. Hence came the Latin race, the Alban fathers, and the lofty walls of Rome. Tell me, Muse, the cause ... why did the queen of heaven make this man, so good and dutiful ... endure so much. Can such wrath reside in deity? (1. 1-11)¹¹

¹⁰Philip Hardie, *Virgil, Greece and Rome New Surveys in the Classics*, no. 28 (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1998), p. 1. Hardie, a moderate "optimist," provides an excellent and balanced review of the last 30 years of scholarship on all aspects of Virgil's work.

¹¹My translations throughout.

The theme is warfare and a man at war. This man, Aeneas, was driven by fate from the ruins of his native Troy; and after many struggles he founded his new city. He was a good and dutiful (*pius*) man. Why then did Juno treat him so harshly: *tantaene animis caelestibus irae?* Milton set out to “justify the ways of God to men.” Virgil did too in a way. But he began with a question to his Muse. And he seems never to have found a fully satisfying answer.

Juno favors Carthage; and she knows that Rome is fated one day to destroy her favorite. Ultimately she cannot prevent this, but she does her best to delay it. Hence the protracted trials and wanderings that she causes for Aeneas. *Tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem.* “What a heavy cost it was to found the Roman race” (33)! This line, set off in emphatic position, signals a major theme of the whole poem: how hard it was for Aeneas to carry out his destined mission and (with line 11) how difficult it is to explain why that should have been the case.

“The *Aeneid* itself might be viewed as a colossal multiple correspondence simile for the whole of Roman history.”¹² The destiny, the struggles, and the doubts are not only those of Aeneas. They belong to the whole of Roman history, from the beginning up to Virgil’s day — and perhaps beyond. There are reasons to believe, as I shall suggest below, that Virgil was looking not only back through Roman history and Augustus’s rise to power but also forward to what still remained to be done, and to how difficult — and fraught with the possibility of failure — that task would be.

The Romans were among history’s winners. But history’s losers are also part of the story. This early introduction of Carthage — not required by the tradition — brings them in from the outset, and no Roman reader could have missed the point. Carthage had been the great enemy and competitor for empire in the western Mediterranean. Rome fought two long, life and death wars with her in the third century B. C. and then, in the second century, brutally and cynically obliterated what was left of her — no longer a threat, only a symbol that had to be destroyed. The experience represents both sides of empire: a glorious victory and a gratuitous act of violence, heroism and brutality, victor and victim. Virgil recalls it at the start of his epic. He did not have to begin

¹²Hardie, *Virgil*, p. 93.

with Carthage. And — though it is disputed — he seems to have been the first to connect the founder of Rome with early Carthage. The Dido story is agreed by all to have been his invention.

The first big scene in the poem is the violent storm sent by Juno to drive Aeneas off his destined course to Italy. When first we meet the hero, he is wishing he was dead, *solvuntur frigore membra* (92): “His limbs were loosed in chilly fright.” Neptune calms the waves — which reminds the poet of the madness (*furor*) of civil strife and of the man who puts it down (148-56). This pattern of strife, furor, and calm runs through the *Aeneid*. But when the Trojans reach land, they are lost and dissipated. Aeneas tries to cheer them up: *forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit* (203) “Perhaps even these things will one day be a joy to remember.” “A perpetual *forsan*, ‘perhaps,’ hovers over the *Aeneid*.”¹³ And Aeneas seems not to be fully convinced by his own words: *spem vultu simulat, premit altum corde dolorem*: “In his face he feigned hope, even as he pressed down the sorrow in his heart (209).

Then the scene shifts to heaven, where Venus complains to Jupiter. He smiles and gently kisses her. Fear not, he says, the fates remain fixed. Aeneas will reach Italy and found his city. And one day his descendants will rule the world in justice and peace.

For them I set no limits — not of time, not of space. I have granted them empire without end ... a race of citizens and lords of all. This is my will ... Then wars will cease and a milder age will dawn. Gray Fides, Vesta, and Remus, with his brother, will give them laws. The grim gates of War will be closed with iron fastenings. And inside impious Furor will sit upon his savage arms, bound with a hundred brazen bolts, roaring fiercely from his blood-stained mouth.

(1. 278-96)

Imperium sine fine dedi (279) ... *jura dabunt* (293, like Dido in 507) ... *claudentur Belli portae* (294). This is Virgil’s optimistic “Roman” voice, patriotic and inspiring. And it stands as a kind of heading over the whole story, so that whatever hardships have gone before and are still to come must be seen in light of it. But even here, there is a note of

¹³Steele Commager, ed. *Virgil: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1966), p. 13.

warning. The doors of War will indeed be closed (294), and behind them “unholy Furor” will be bound with a hundred chains of bronze. But the image is not a comforting one. Furor (civil war) will still be armed and menacing (294-6), capable of breaking out at any time, as he does in the final scene of the poem, which like the present passage is “an open ending, leaving more stories to be told, more outbreaks of chaos to be reduced to order . . . that the reader may however experience more as pious hopes than as fixed certainties.”¹⁴

The story resumes with another striking juxtaposition. Jupiter sends Mercury to Carthage with a message for the queen. She is to help Aeneas and thus become the instrument — and the victim — of the great plan of which she is not even conscious, *fati nescia Dido* (299). The grand story of Rome’s fate is not her story. She is “ignorant of fate.” Rome’s destined and divinely decreed greatness runs right up against its first victim. Dido stands for Carthage. And her downfall is a tragedy. But for now, Mercury will see to it that, “as the gods will, the Phoenicians lay aside their hostility. And most of all the queen was rendered calm and kindly to the Teucrians” (1. 302-4).

Dido is destined to fall in love with Aeneas and later, driven to hatred and despair, to commit suicide when he abandons her to follow his fated duty. Her death foreshadows that of her city in historical time. Both will be victims of a necessary but un pitying divine plan. It is in this light that I suggest we read the story of Aeneas’s reception at Carthage. The city and its queen are made to stand for civilization (*jura dabat*, 507, like Romulus and Remus in 293), compassion, and hospitality — all of which will be swept aside, at least for now. On the other hand, Dido also stands (“optimistically”) for irrational attachments which stand in the way of progress and must be overcome, even if this hurts Aeneas and destroys her.

Then Juno and Venus agree to send Cupid (for reasons hard to untangle in the text) to charm Dido into love with Aeneas. She forgets her pledge to remain true to her dead husband; and mad with love, she roams the city “like a doe hit by an arrow from a distance, unsuspecting.” And the hunter who let it fly is unaware that his “lethal shaft is stuck in her side” (4. 68-73). Hunter and hunted both “innocent” and

¹⁴Hardie, *Virgil*, pp. 73-4.

unsuspecting. Later, destiny calls Aeneas to Italy and, against her desperate protests and his own desires, he has to leave Dido. She goes wild with grief and anger and kills herself, calling down everlasting hatred between Rome and Carthage. Who is “to blame?” Neither really.

In Book 6, Aeneas meets the shade of Dido in the underworld. He pleads with her to forgive him: I didn’t want to go, he pleads. The gods commanded it. How could I have known that my leaving would hurt you so (456-64)? He weeps, but she refuses even to look at him. She turns and walks away with her former husband, as unmoved as if she had been made of stone. As Jasper Griffin says, “Aeneas’s coming destroyed Dido ... The destruction is final, and there is no forgiveness for it. Aeneas meant well, but the damage is done, and he is left with the guilt ... a profound and poignant symbol of the gain and loss of empire.”¹⁵

Later, in Book 7, at the start of the wars against the Italians, Virgil makes the same point about “innocence” with another hunting image. Ascanius goes out for sport and shoots a stag. It turns out that the stag was the pet of Silvia, the daughter of the Latin king’s chief herdsman. Virgil turns it into a symbol of peace and domestic tenderness. The wounded stag comes home covered with blood and crying for help (500-2). The shooting enrages the herdsman and is the occasion for the outbreak of hostilities. Griffin once again: “It is irresistible to recall Dido, compared to a wounded deer, shot by a careless archer. The symbolism is clear: the god-sent invaders destroy the innocent. In both cases there was no intention of doing such harm, but the harm is done.”¹⁶ Like Dido, the native peoples of Italy are the innocent victims of Roman power and destiny — which are also “innocent” in their own way.

A recurrent theme of the later books is that of the beautiful young warriors who die on both sides. It is the same pattern of “innocent” destructiveness, not directly intended perhaps, but “necessary” nonetheless. At the funeral of Pallas in Book 11, Virgil evokes the memory of Dido one last time. Aeneas and his men make a bier of branches to carry Pallas home for burial. They lay him on the bier

like a flower plucked by a young girl, a soft violet or drooping hyacinth, whose color and shape have not yet faded, though the mother earth no longer nourishes and strengthens it. (11. 68-71)

¹⁵Griffin, *Aeneid*, p. 88.

¹⁶*Ibid*, p. 92.

Then Aeneas wraps the body in two elaborate robes which Dido had woven for him "once upon a time lovingly with her own hands." These will go up in flames along with Pallas and the captives which Aeneas will slaughter on the funeral pyre in an act of vindictive frustration.

Rome's victims, therefore, include not only Dido and Carthage but the Italian enemy as well. And not only Aeneas's enemies, but his allies as well. And the loss of Pallas unleashes furious anger in Aeneas, an anger which we shall see again in the closing scene of the poem, when he kills the helpless Turnus.

The Ivory Gate of False Dreams

Book 6 is a turning point in the story. Aeneas has finally reached Italy, where he descends to the underworld and meets his father Anchises. At last he sees the future clearly, leaves the past behind, and emerges fortified to carry out his destiny no matter how terrible the wars which (he knows) still await him. Yet even here there are perplexities. In one of the great Roman passages, Anchises shows his son the future glories of Rome. "Come now," he says, "I shall explain to you and teach you what glory the fates have in store for the Dardan race one day" (6. 756-9).

The pageant begins with the Alban kings and pauses at Romulus, where Anchises proclaims that, "under his auspices glorious Rome will expand her empire over all the earth and her spirit as high as heaven" (6. 781-2).

From Romulus Anchises's narration jumps straight to Augustus who, he says,

"will bring back again to Latium, the Golden Age of Saturn ... and extend his empire over nations far and wide ...

Should we then hesitate to put our courage to the test? Or shall we fear to take the Ausonian land for our own?

(6. 792-807)

Augustus is to be a model and inspiration for Aeneas! The pageant continues with the kings and the heroes of the Republic — not without some dark notes (Brutus, Caesar and Pompey) — and culminates with Virgil's most resounding statement of Rome's world-historic destiny.

Others will beat bronze into statues with flesh so soft that it seems to breathe — I do believe it — and draw living faces out of marble. They will plead their cases better, and with precision chart the courses of the heavens, and predict the times the stars will rise. But you, Roman, remember that it is your task to rule the peoples with your power — *This will be your art* — to keep the peace and civilize, to spare the conquered peoples and beat down the proud in war (6. 847-54).

But even here there are tears. Anchises points to Marcellus, a hero of the war against Hannibal, and at his side a younger Marcellus, “beautifully formed ... but with clouded brow” (861-2), who is destined to be the son of Augustus’s sister Octavia and husband of his daughter Julia. Augustus had him in mind to be his successor, but he died at the age of 19 in 23 B.C. *Miserande puer*, Anchises calls him (882), and he ends his encounter with Aeneas on a note of lamentation:

Give me lilies by the handful. Let me scatter radiant blossoms in great heaps—gifts for the spirit of my grandson—futile gesture though that be.

(6. 883-6)

Why *this*? And why *here*? The sad, untimely death of Marcellus is the only current event in the *Aeneid*, and Virgil may have been present at the funeral. Was he offering consolation to Augustus? Perhaps, but he was also returning again to his themes of how little consolation there can be for the parents of the young and brave who die (Polites, Polydorus, Nisus and Euryalus, Pallas, Lausus, Turnus) and the “fragility of hopes vested in the coming generation.”¹⁷ He might also be asking himself what will become of the hopes vested in Augustus after he has gone.

Aeneas is “fired with love of glory in the years to come” (889) by what he has seen and heard. But there is more, “a Virgilian enigma (and none the worse for that),” as R. G. Austin said.¹⁸

¹⁷Hardie, *Virgil*, p. 17.

¹⁸R. G. Austin, *P. Vergili Maronis Aeneidos Liber Sextus* (Oxford, 1977), p. 276.

There are twin gates of sleep. One, they say, is carved from horn. Through it true shades find easy exit. The other gate is ivory, pure and bright. Through it the spirits of the dead send false dreams up to earth. Anchises, his message given, took the Sybil and his son to the gate of ivory and sent them back by it (6. 893-8).

Why does Virgil have Aeneas leave by the gate of false dreams? Perhaps no passage in the whole *Aeneid* has caused more perplexity, not least because it comes at such a crucial point in the poem. Is it nothing more than an ancient belief (doubtfully attested for Virgil's day) that only dreams that come *after* midnight are true dreams (those *before* midnight being false)? Few if any have been satisfied to leave it at that. It is literally true that Aeneas and the Sybil, being alive, are not "true shades." But is that all? Are we not invited to go to another level and think that the whole episode in the underworld may have been nothing more than a dream, albeit one in which Aeneas came to terms with his personal past and future? Or, on still another level, might not Virgil be expressing uncertainty about some of the content of Book 6, for example the hope contained in the philosophical sections that virtue will be rewarded in the next life and that suffering on behalf of others will somehow make sense in the end? Or is he thinking once again of the future (as with Marcellus) and wondering whether the Roman past, with all its violence and ambiguities, might not, after all, be much of a guarantee for a better future? I think that I incline to this last view, especially in light of what I would like to suggest is going on in the next (and last) scene which I shall discuss.

The Killing of Turnus

At the end of Book 12— another emphatic position— the outcome is no longer in doubt. Jupiter and Juno have settled their differences. The Trojans have won. Aeneas has wounded Turnus and stands poised to finish him off. Turnus begs for mercy and Aeneas begins to relent. Then he spots the belt of Pallas, which Turnus is wearing, and in the *Aeneid*'s concluding verses:

Burning with fury and awesome in his rage, Aeneas cried, "Did you think you could escape me, dressed as you are in the spoils of one of mine? Pallas it is who kills you now. Pallas takes revenge upon your cursed blood." With this, in rage, he buried his sword in the

chest of his foe. And Turnus' limbs went loose in chilly death, and with a groan his life went off, resentful, to the shades below.

(12. 946-52)

Why end with a scene of unleashed fury and revenge? Philip Hardie says of the scene that, "The only thing that is clear about the end of the *Aeneid* is that it is a passage of great complexity."¹⁹ On the one (more optimist) hand, sad and brutal as his death was, Turnus simply had to go. He represented an older order and an outmoded style of heroism. Fate and *pietas* had, in the end, to triumph over the irrational (as with Dido). Aeneas had an obligation to Pallas's father, Evander, to avenge his son: "Pallas it is who kills you now." And he had a duty to his own people to destroy the last dangerous enemy. Even Aeneas's rage was justified, since it was in proportion to the provocation and in service of the common good. He acted like a good Aristotelian and was not a Stoic saint. His just vengeance foreshadows that of Augustus against the murderers of his father, Caesar, and his dedication of a temple to Mars Ultor in the Forum of Augustus. The question of mercy or revenge was a current question in Virgil's Rome. He seems to have wanted to leave it that way. But why?

On the other (more pessimist) side, Turnus has seemed to some readers to have become a more and more sympathetic figure as his end approached. Pathos is surely the dominant note in the final scene. Some readers have felt that they were being led to expect--or at least to hope--that Turnus would be spared. Virgil could have ended his poem differently. The fact that he did not is at the very least disturbing. What is the poet trying to say? Is this merely another case of unpleasant but unavoidable killing in the course of empire, making Turnus's dying groan "the poem's last protest by the suffering individual against the juggernaut of Roman destiny."²⁰ Aeneas was to have been a more civilized hero than his Homeric models. His father told him to *parcere subjectis*. In the end he is less complete than Achilles, whom Homer allowed to come to terms with Priam and with his own death. "The effect, haunting, complex, and in harmony with the rest of the poem, is deliberate."²¹

¹⁹Hardie, *Virgil*, p. 100.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 101.

²¹Griffin, *Virgil*, p. 102.

At the end of Book 6, Virgil seemed to me to be concerned about the future. In the light of that and of the uncomfortable picture of Furor in Book 1 — chained but still armed and dangerous — might not the end of Book 12 be an illustration of the fact that violence has a logic of its own and cannot be turned off and on at will? There is no guarantee that Furor will not break his chains again, as he has so often in the past.

Whatever else the killing of Turnus means, it clearly shows that Aeneas did not learn pity — or had not yet learned it — from what he had suffered and inflicted on others. Two haunting verbal echoes, which link Aeneas and Turnus, victor and victim, across the whole length and breadth of the *Aeneid*, seem to make this point. The words Virgil uses to describe Turnus's death struggle, *solvuntur frigore membra*, "His limbs went loose in chill [death]" (12. 951), are the very words which he had used of Aeneas when we first met him buffeted by the storm, dispirited, and wishing he were dead "His limbs went loose in chill [fright]" (1. 92). And, in delivering the fatal blow, Aeneas *ferrum adverso sub pectore condit* "He buried (planted) his sword in the chest of his foe" (12. 950), which eerily evokes the programmatic *tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem*, "What a heavy cost it was to found (plant) the Roman race" (1. 33), costly for victor and victim alike.

For Virgil, it seems, the Roman achievement was both great and necessary. It was also incomplete. Or was it fatally flawed? Or given the lessons of history, could one feel any confidence that it would last? For both optimists and pessimists, Virgil continually raises — but does not answer — such questions. "Aeneas' laborious attempts to make sense of and control the events into which he finds himself thrust are a model for the task of reading and interpretation imposed on the poem's audience."²²

(D) Conclusion

S. J. Harrison concluded in his survey of late twentieth century scholarship on the *Aeneid* that:

There is no consensus about the poem's meaning or fundamental ideology. In some areas of scholarly endeavour this might be re-

²²Hardie, *Virgil*, p. 79.

garded as undesirable; when dealing with great poetry, however, greater technical knowledge does not necessarily lead to unanimity or certainty on central issues, and the volume and variety of recent criticism is a tribute to the continuing literary interest and stature of the *Aeneid*.²³

We who are citizens of the United States share, as the Romans did, in the benefits and burdens of empire. Like them, we have a strong cover story, in which we stand for peace, freedom, and the rule of law at home and abroad. We have been in the custom of thinking of ourselves as operating at a more elevated moral level than other civilizations and polities. On the other hand, a lot of people seem to get left behind; and our history, like that of the Romans, has in large part been the story of our wars— including those among ourselves and against the native peoples of our “manifestly” destined homeland. Destruction not necessarily willed but still performed has been a large part of our story. In the past generation, regret and unresolved guilt for the cost to others of our well being (never wholly absent before) have more and more been included in the story.

Virgil set his story in the distant, mythic past and worked within the conventions of an ancient poetic tradition. At the same time, much of the rest of Rome’s history is present in the story too. Furthermore, Virgil wrote from the point of view of one of history’s winners. Perhaps this combination of distance and complicity is part of the explanation of how he was able to raise the questions that he does in the way he that does.

As the nature and shape of US power in the world shifts and as I myself change, Virgil still seems to me to raise just the right issues for a citizen of “the last superpower:” the violence not willed but done nonetheless, the innocence of our intentions and the guilt — or at least regret — for some of the results, the fate of those who get caught on the losing end of historic destiny, the ambiguity of power and the limitations of any historical project, concern about the dismal future prospects of the world’s poor majorities — and at the same time the difficulty of imagining a better way to do things. ↪

²³*Ibid*, p. 19-20.