Chapter 1

Background

1 Virgil in the light of his time

Virgil's *Aeneid* has almost certainly generated a longer and larger tradition of commentary than any other poem in the European canon. A critic who offers to add to this enormous accretion might take as his starting point a reflection by Frank Kermode (*Forms of Attention*, 1985): 'since we have no experience of a venerable text that ensures its own perpetuity, we may reasonably say that the medium in which it survives is commentary'. The *Aeneid*, a venerable text if ever there was one, has been subjected to a continual process of revaluation from the fourth century AD until our own time. Consequently, while remaining as it always was, it has undergone successive transformations which have had the effect of making it seem perpetually modern, and which have in a sense become part of the totality of the text as experienced by the reader. Translation, as well as critical commentary, 'appreciation' and interpretation, must be included in this process of transformation and accretion.

The poem's unique place as a landmark in European letters is partly owing to historical circumstances. On 2 September 31 BC Gaius Julius Octavianus, adopted son and heir of the assassinated and deified Julius Caesar, defeated Mark Antony and Cleopatra at the battle of Actium – events familar to English readers from Shakespeare's play – and emerged as *princeps*, nominally first citizen but effectively sole ruler, of the Roman world. It was a decisive moment in history. About a year later, Virgil, then aged forty, began work on the *Aeneid*, and included in the poem's eighth book a splendid panegyric of this victory: his treatment is epic, not history, and shows how in the space of a few years Actium had become, in the

words of Sir Ronald Syme (*The Roman Revolution*) 'the birth legend in the mythology of the principate'.

In 27 BC Octavian received the title of Augustus and established peace throughout the Roman world. It was a peace not without local interruptions and campaigns in Europe and the east, but for the Romans it was a true peace, for it marked the end of civil strife in Italy after decades of power-struggles between rival leaders. In unifying Italy Augustus achieved something which in modern times was not to happen again until the nineteenth century.

During the years preceding Actium Virgil had completed his *Georgics*, a poem about agriculture full of praise of the fruitfulness of the Italian countryside: in the words of a modern translator of the poem, C. Day Lewis, he 'sang in time of war the arts of peace'. But the first book of the *Georgics* had ended with a powerful evocation of a nation torn by the horrors of civil war – *saevit toto Mars impius orbe*, 'wicked war rages over the whole earth' – and a prayer to the gods to allow Octavian to come as saviour of his generation:

> hunc saltem everso iuvenem succurrere saeclo
> ne prohibete
> Forbid not this young man from coming to rescue at last
> Our ruined generation

The 'Pax Augusta' was marked by an expensive religious programme of rebuilding and restoration in Rome: temples and altars of victory and thanksgiving were erected, notably the splendid marble temple of Apollo on the Palatine (remains of which can still be seen) built alongside Augustus' own house and dedicated on 9 October 28 BC. Taking poet's licence, Virgil imagined in the eighth book of the *Aeneid* that this temple was already finished in 29 BC when Augustus celebrated a triple triumph, in commemoration of victories in Illyricum, Egypt and Actium itself; he depicts the *princeps* reviewing the parade of conquered peoples on the steps of this temple:

> at Caesar triplici invectus Romana triumpho
> moenia, dis Italis uotum immortale sacrabat,
> maxima ter centum totam delubra per urbem . . .
> ipse sedens niveo candentis limine Phoebi
> dona recognoscit populorum . . .
> incedunt victae longo ordina gentes . . .

> But Caesar, riding in triple triumph into the city,
> Made a solemn and undying vow to the gods of Italy –
> Three hundred great temples throughout the city . . .
> He himself sitting on the snow-white steps of shining Apollo's temple
> Acknowledges the gifts of the people . . .
> and the defeated nations pass in long procession.

Here too Virgil takes poetic licence, for in his autobiography *Res Gestae* (Things Achieved) Augustus says he built twelve new temples and restored eighty-two others. These acts of *pietas* (observance of what is due towards gods and men) were of the greatest importance. The Romans seem understandably to have felt that the years of civil bloodshed they had experienced were a kind of curse going back to Romulus' legendary killing of his brother Remus and perhaps even further back to an act of impiety by King Laomedon of Troy, who was said to have withheld payment promised to the gods for building the walls of Troy; Virgil refers to this in the *Georgics*:

> satis iam pridem sanguine nostro
> Laomedonteae luimus periuria Troiae.
> We have long ago sufficiently expiated
> the perjury of Laomedon's Troy.
>
> (*Georgics* 1. 501–2)

The hero of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas, was himself a Trojan who escaped from the ruins of Troy when the gods themselves helped the Greeks to destroy the walls they had once built: this is described in *Aeneid* II, the tale of the fall of Troy. The Romans sometimes attributed their own misfortunes to want of *pietas*, whence Virgil's emphasis of this quality in his hero, *pius Aeneas*. Virgil's contemporary, the poet Horace, also says that until the temples which have been allowed to fall into neglect and desecration are restored and rededicated, the sins of the fathers will continue to be visited on the children.

Augustus died in AD 14, having by then laid the foundations of the Julio-Claudian dynasty and thus in effect, succeeding where his adoptive father Julius Caesar had failed, established the Roman Empire. During his reign another event occurred, of greater importance to the world than the battle of Actium. By one of history's significant accidents Virgil's celebration of the Pax Augusta coincided with the birth of Christ, the Prince of Peace, 'the still point of

the turning world' (in T. S. Eliot's phrase). Thus the Romans' heartfelt belief that at last, in the words of Shakespeare in *Antony and Cleopatra*, 'the time of universal peace is near', was justified in the temporal world a few years before the unique, unrepeatable transition from paganism to Christianity, though it was to be several centuries before the Roman empire officially adopted the new religion. Throughout nearly the whole of its 2,000 years of life the *Aeneid* has been read in a Christian context, and its celebration of the Pax Augusta could be seen as inaugurating a new order of time and history. This reading reached its zenith in the middle ages when Virgil was revered as a 'magus' and as '*anima naturaliter Christiana*', a naturally Christian soul, appearing as Dante's guide through hell and purgatory in his *Divine Comedy* (see below, pp. 98–100); but it has been revived, albeit with different premises, by modern critics, e.g. Frank Kermode in his book *The Classic*.

In *Aeneid* VI the shade of Aeneas' father Anchises reveals to his son, in the Elysian fields, the future heroes of Rome, culminating in Augustus:

> hic vir, hic est, tibi quem promitti saepius audis,
> Augustus Caesar, divi genus, aurea condet
> saecula qui rursus Latio regnata per arva
> Saturno quondam, super et Garamantes et Indos
> proferet imperium; iacet extra sidera tellus,
> extra anni solisque vias, ubi caelifer Atlas
> axem umero torquet stellis ardentibus aptum . . .
> . . . nec vero Alcides tantum telluris obivit.
> This is the man, this is he, so often promised you,
> Augustus Caesar, of race divine, who shall
> Establish again in Latium the golden race
> In the fields where Saturn reigned. He shall extend
> His empire beyond the Africans and the Indians,
> To a land beyond the zodiac and the paths of the solar year
> Where on his shoulders heaven-bearing Atlas
> Revolves the world's axis studded with blazing stars . . .
> Not even Hercules travelled so far.

The 'Messianic' tone and language of this passage are impossible to ignore. In addition, in a short pastoral poem (the fourth eclogue) written long before the *Aeneid*, in 40 BC, Virgil tells of the imminent

birth of a boy-child of divine origin who shall rule over a world to which peace and justice shall return, and restore the golden age. Some of the imagery of this poem is found in other prophetic literature (see further below, 13–15).

The idea that Augustus was the 'promised saviour' of his people is firmly rooted in the various 'saviour cults' of the first century BC, of which only Christianity was destined to survive. One such was Hercules, to whom Augustus is compared in the passage quoted above. These saviour-heroes laboured on behalf of civilisation, ridding the world of various manifestations of evil and barbarism – they are sometimes called 'culture-heroes' – and were eventually deified.

One such exploit of Hercules, his slaying of a fire-breathing monster called Cacus, took place, according to a legend which Virgil uses in *Aeneid* VIII, on the very site of the future Rome, on the Aventine hill. Hercules was subsequently deified and was worshipped in Rome at the Great Altar of Hercules which survived into imperial times. Virgil imagines the cult to have already started in the heroic age of Aeneas. His description of the ritual bears some resemblance to the corporate ceremonies of Christian communion: the shared feast, the wine, the hymn, the prayer, the deity who will come to help those in need; the phrase Virgil uses to describe how Hercules came to those in danger, *auxilium adventumque dei*, has an almost liturgical ring, and the same word *adventus* is used also of Augustus in *Aeneid* VI.

The poet Horace also refers to Augustus' divine origin and divine destiny: *serus in caelum redeas*, 'may you return late to heaven', he writes in Odes 1.2; in Odes 3.5 he is more fulsome: *praesens divus habebitur/ Augustus adiectis Britannis/ imperio gravibusque Persis*. 'With the addition of Britain and Persia to the empire, Augustus will be accepted as god made manifest.' In Odes 3.3 Horace visualised Augustus drinking nectar with Hercules and Bacchus, another 'culture-hero' who according to legend brought the arts of civilisation, including viniculture, to the East. In Epistles 2.1 Horace provides a useful register of these culture-heroes and their achievements.

> Romulus et Liber pater et cum Castore Pollux
> post ingentia facta deorum in templa recepti,
> dum terras hominumque colunt genus, aspera bella

componunt, agros assignant, oppida condunt,
ploravere suis non respondere favorem
speratum meritis . . . exstinctus amabitur idem.
praesenti tibi maturos largimur honores,
iurandasque tuum per numen ponimus aras,
nil oriturum alias, nil ortum tale fatentes.
Romulus and father Bacchus, Castor and Pollux,
After mighty deeds were received into the temples of the gods;
But while they were [performing these deeds], civilising
nations and men,
Ending wars, redistributing land, founding cities,
They felt it keenly that they received no favours
Corresponding to their deserts . . . You have to be dead to be loved.
But to you [Augustus] we pay due honours in good time,
While you are still among us, to you we set up altars,
And we admit that none like you will ever come or ever came.

The old culture-heroes had to wait till they were dead to be celebrated: in Pope's words, 'these suns of glory please not till they set'. Augustus did not have to wait. It should be remembered that this poem was written some years after Virgil's death, when the 'personality cult' of Augustus had grown, and that this poem is intended as panegyric or 'praise of Caesar'.

All the great culture-heroes were notable for fighting against barbarism on behalf of civilisation. The fight between Hercules and Cacus in *Aeneid* VIII is a paradigm of many such encounters. They have their literary origin in the mythical battles of Zeus and the Olympian deities (who were always presented by the poets Homer and Hesiod anthropomorphically, possessed of great physical beauty and strength) against various giants, monsters, centaurs, Amazons, at the very dawn of time. All these encounters might be seen as examples of an eternal conflict between order and disorder, good and evil, light and dark. By the time we reach Homer, these encounters have become more humanistic, though there remains Achilles' extraordinary fight with the river-god in *Iliad* XXI, and, in the *Odyssey*, various engagements in which the rational hero outwits a one-eyed giant, a witch, a magic whirlpool, etc. When we reach the *Aeneid*, the description of the battle of Actium in book VIII is presented as a fight between the Olympian deities on the side of Augustus,

and the dog-headed monsters of Egyptian worship, on the side of Cleopatra.

Aeneas himself, the hero of Virgil's epic, fits into this sequence of culture-heroes. His principal enemy in the poem, Turnus, is not monstrous or barbarous, though he is depicted as irrational, hot-headed, selfish and self-vaunting. Virgil takes even further Homer's tendency to present both sides of a conflict with dignity and humanity. Nevertheless, Aeneas' civilising mission is emphasised throughout. The role of the saviour was not merely to rid the world of evil, but also to build some positive and lasting good. 'Not by conquest alone, but by the founding of a lasting city, did a hero win divine honours in life and divinity after death' (Syme); Horace, in the passage quoted above, lists the founding of cities as one of the civilizing achievements of the culture-hero. The real theme of the *Aeneid*, as was clear to its earliest readers, was the founding of Rome and its subsequent rise, under Augustus, to its greatest glory. In this respect Aeneas could be seen as a prefiguration of Augustus himself. The labours of Aeneas are presented as the first stage of a mighty endeavour which will later call on the efforts of Romulus and the great heroes of the republic, and which will culminate in the triumph of Augustus: *tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem*: 'so great a toil it was to found the Roman nation' (*Aeneid*, 1.33).

2 Life of Virgil

Publius Vergilius Maro was born on 15 October 70 BC (the traditional date, though according to Dante he was born in July, see *Inferno* 1.70) at Andes, a village near Mantua, the modern Pietole; he died at Brindisi on 20 September 19 BC. He was buried near Naples, on the road to Pozzuoli: a tomb purporting to be his can still be seen. The spelling of his name in antiquity was Vergilius. But by AD 400 the spelling Virgilius had begun to creep in: perhaps by corruption through the kind of popular and usually false etymology the Romans themselves had been so fond of. The new spelling might suggest a connection both with *virga*, the rod by which the god Hermes 'Guide of Souls' marshalled the souls of the dead to the underworld – a reference to the poet's own role as the magus of *Aeneid* VI in which Aeneas is led to the underworld – and with *virgo*:

Virgil was nicknamed Parthenias, 'Maiden', in his own lifetime, rather as Milton was nicknamed 'Our Lady of Christ's' at Cambridge. Virgil never married and may have had homosexual inclinations: although the presence of homosexual themes in the *Eclogues* is a traditional characteristic of the pastoral genre, deriving from Greek exemplars, the intense mutual affection of the young Trojan heroes Nisus and Euryalus in *Aeneid* IX does seem more evidently homoerotic than, say, the friendship of Achilles and Patroclus in Homer's *Iliad*.

The new spelling ousted the older, correct Latin spelling and passed into the English and French vernaculars as Virgil(e). It is a common though misguided piece of pedantry to spell his name in English as Vergil, though his Latin name is nowadays always correctly spelt Vergilius.

A biography of Virgil was written during the reign of Trajan (AD 117–38) by Suetonius. This survives in a version by Aelius Donatus (4th century AD), whose commentary on Virgil apart from this *Life* and a preface, is lost; but it was used by another critic, Servius, who also wrote in the 4th century AD and whose monumental commentary does survive, both in its original form and in an expanded form first published by the French scholar Pierre Daniel in 1600. The additional matter in this longer version may represent parts of the earlier commentary by Donatus. The Donatus *Life* lists various juvenile writings of the poet, but these are nowadays regarded (with one or two possible rather than probable exceptions) as spurious imitations written shortly after the poet's death: they are included in the ancient manuscripts and are known as the Appendix Vergiliana. It is generally assumed that the canon of the poet's authentic compositions consists of three books: the *Eclogues*, the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid*.

Virgil was by temperament shy and retiring and made no mark on Roman public life. He was brought up in the country and educated at Cremona, Milan, and Rome, where he studied rhetoric, and was preparing for a legal and political career, which he soon abandoned, retiring to Naples when the civil war broke out (49 BC) to study philosophy, his first, and, as tradition tells us concerning his plans for his old age, last love. His father lost his land during the 'dispossessions', when land was redistributed by the triumvirate of

Lepidus, Antony and Octavian (as he then still was) to returning veterans after the campaign of Philippi (42 BC). The poet himself may also have been temporarily dispossessed and had his land restored through 'friends in high places', though this episode is speculative and is based on the scenarios of the first and ninth eclogues, which should not be read as literal autobiography.

Virgil was also a friend of Horace and of other poets, notable in their day, whose work does not survive or survives only in fragments, including Cinna, Gallus and Varius; the last-named, together with Plotius Tucca, edited the *Aeneid* for publication after Virgil's death. These writers made up a literary circle which was linked to Augustus through his friend and counsellor Maecenas, a notable patron of the arts and a friend both of Virgil, who dedicated his second work, the *Georgics*, to him, and of Horace, who refers to him frequently: in his fifth satire he describes a journey to Brindisi made in the company of Maecenas, Varius, Tucca and Virgil, 'than whom purer souls never breathed, nor any to whom I am closer'; and in his tenth satire he says that he writes for the discriminating few and that it is enough for him if Plotius, Varius, Maecenas, Virgil and several other chosen spirits like his work.

Virgil began the composition of his greatest work, the *Aeneid*, around 29 BC. A few years later its progress was arousing such expectancy that the poet Propertius wrote:

> nescio quid maius nascitur Iliade
> something greater than the *Iliad* is in the making.

In the year 26 BC Augustus wrote to Virgil from Spain that he had not yet seen the outline of the poem or any passage from it; but a few years later the poet read books II, IV, and VI to Augustus and his circle. In 19 BC Virgil left Italy to travel to Greece, intending to spend a further three years revising and polishing the *Aeneid* and then to devote the rest of his life to the study of philosophy. In the event, he never carried out that plan. He met Augustus in Athens, and was persuaded to return home with him. He fell ill at Megara after going sightseeing on a hot day. He embarked for Italy none the less, and died at Brindisi on 20 Sept. All details in this paragraph are taken from the ancient *Life*, as is the tradition that he first tried to persuade Varius to burn the manuscript of the *Aeneid* if anything should happen to him,

but that Varius refused to give any undertaking; in the event Virgil left the manuscript to Varius and Tucca, who published the poem on Augustus' instructions. They evidently did very little editing, since the sixty-odd incomplete lines which it contains (and which support the statement that he intended to revise the whole text) were reproduced as they stood, and do so to this day; though some ancient scholars did make attempts to complete them, these were never accepted into the text. It should however be emphasised that the poem, though unrevised, is in no sense incomplete or unfinished (as Spenser's *Faerie Queene* is unfinished). We know, also from the ancient *Life*, that Virgil first wrote a prose draft of the whole work, then began to compose it passage by passage, not necessarily in the order of the twelve books, so that some portions of the earlier books may well have been written after some of the later sections. But it is to be observed that nothing from the second half of the poem is recorded as having been read to Augustus.

3 The *Eclogues*

The *Aeneid* draws continually on the past: not only on earlier Greek and Latin epic poetry but also on its author's own previous compositions. A brief account of these earlier works is therefore necessary. The first publication was the collection of ten short pastoral eclogues (only two of them exceed 100 lines in length) called in Latin *Bucolica*, and modelled on the *Idylls* of Theocritus, the Greek poet of the third century BC, who is the earliest known exponent of the genre. Virgil's eclogues were probably originally issued separately or in pairs (Coleman 15), though the precise order and date of their composition remains speculative: none is likely to be earlier than 42 BC or later than 37 BC. Each poem is a self-contained artefact, but it seems probable that Virgil planned a set of poems from the start. Six of the poems, nos. 2, 3, 4, 5, 7 and 8 are either dedicated to, or in some way connected with, the historian Asinius Pollio, who according to the ancient Life first proposed to Virgil that he should try his hand at pastoral; these form the core of the book. The other four eclogues seem from internal evidence to have been added later to make up the set of ten. The first is evidently a 'programme' poem written as an introduction to the whole work; both it and the ninth