

I

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Introduction: 'The Classic of All Europe'

On 18 December 1943, during some of the darkest days of the Second World War, a leader appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*, commending the Roman poet Virgil – ‘one of the most valuable common possessions of a distracted humanity’ – and the newly formed Virgil Society.¹ On the opposite page a letter announced the formation of the Society with its purpose ‘to bring together those men and women everywhere who are united in cherishing the central educational tradition of Western Europe’ among whom ‘the love of the poetry of Virgil is most likely to be found’. The signatories included the poet T. S. Eliot (the Society’s first President), J. W. Mackail, Latin scholar and son-in-law to the painter Edward Burne-Jones, and Vita Sackville-West. Early letters of support were received from Lord Wavell, then Viceroy of India, and from the architect of the 1944 Education Act, R. A. Butler, who wrote that ‘the influence of men of such sensitive humanity as Virgil will be needed in the post-war years’. The letter to the *TLS* describes Virgil as ‘the symbol of continuous tradition’, and tradition was throughout his life a particular word of power for Eliot (in 1919 he had published his famous and still indispensable essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ on the subject). *The Waste Land* includes Virgil’s *laquearia* (*Aen.* 1.726) among its many splintered intertexts, and Virgilian echoes appear elsewhere in his poetry, while after the war he published two artful if rather derivative essays on Virgil (discussed here in detail in Chapter 2). However, one suspects that Eliot’s allegiance was always more to Virgil as a convenient cultural icon than as a particular personal favourite. Eliot’s Virgil is above all the Virgil who guides Dante through Hell and Purgatory to the Earthly Paradise and Beatrice, and for him, as for the great scholar E. R. Curtius, it is the link between Virgil and Dante that is the very heart of the European Latin-based tradition.

¹ For the text and more details, see Blandford (1993).

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The inaugural date of the Virgil Society is obviously significant. ‘Western Civilisation’ – one recalls the famous quip often wrongly attributed to Gandhi ‘it would be a good idea’ – was at its lowest ebb, and needed to be rebuilt from its foundations. Europeans often turn to Virgil at such moments, partly because the *Aeneid* itself both reflects a time of turmoil in Rome and offers the hope at least of redemption after suffering and labour. However, it would be hard to imagine a Virgil Society being formed today amid quite such loud cultural fanfares. And the Society, estimable as it doubtless is, has scarcely played that ‘important part in the intellectual life of the country, in reversing the present descent to vulgarization of taste and debasement of standards’ envisaged in the letter. Meanwhile the study of Latin as a language has broadly continued its seemingly inexorable decline; prediction is always perilous, but it is hard to conceive that it will ever resume the cultural supremacy among the educated which it enjoyed over so many long centuries. Nonetheless it is striking that, in publishing terms at least, interest in the classical tradition has been enjoying something of a marked revival recently.²

Certainly fewer people today read Virgil in Latin than in 1943. However, the *Aeneid* in translation is still widely included in university courses of the ‘Great Books’ type, and new versions of the poem are constantly appearing. Something of the power of the canonical name thus still persists. Witness the Irish poet Seamus Heaney’s *Seeing Things*, first published in 1991, to immediate acclaim. The collection is framed by translations of two passages of what for Heaney is clearly canonical poetry: Virgil’s account of Aeneas’ consultation of the Sibyl and the instructions he receives from her about finding the Golden Bough, often read as a symbol of wisdom and initiation, prior to his descent into the Underworld, and Dante’s meeting in *Inferno* 3 with Charon the ferryman of Hell, itself inspired by another episode in *Aeneid* 6. (Heaney’s complete translation of this book was published posthumously in 2016.) The first original poem in the book, ‘The Journey Back’, describes an encounter with a more immediate poetic predecessor, Philip Larkin, whose shade quotes from Dante and describes himself as ‘A nine-to-five man who had seen poetry’; the piece resonates with earlier poetic meetings, T. S. Eliot’s with the ‘familiar compound ghost’ in part two of ‘Little Gidding’ and – one of Eliot’s intertexts here – Dante’s with the shade of Virgil at the outset of the *Divine Comedy*. In his new pursuit of the visionary, Heaney was also coming home to some of the historically most influential traditions of

² See e.g. Kallendorf (2007b); Grafton, Most, and Settis (2010); Silk, Gildenhard, and Barrow (2014). For Virgil, see Farrell and Putnam (2010) and, on the *Aeneid*, Hardie (2014). The Blackwell *Virgil Encyclopedia* (Thomas and Ziolkowski 2014) has many entries on the tradition.

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Western poetry. Not long afterwards Heaney became a Nobel Laureate, and *Seeing Things* an A-level set text. Successful canonisation can be achieved with surprising rapidity – the *Aeneid* itself, greeted (according to some with a degree of irony) by the elegist Propertius in advance of its publication as 'something greater than the *Iliad*' (*nescioquid maius ... Iliade*, 2.34.66), almost instantly became a school text, and part of the furniture of the minds of educated Romans. We could say, following the argument of Colin Burrow's chapter on translation in this volume (Chapter 7), that Heaney, coming from what some might see as the 'margins' of Europe, seems to be laying claim to a share of the dominant cultural authority of the 'centre', in part by his appeal to Virgil.

There has over many years been vigorous and often acrimonious debate about the status and significance of the canon, regarded at one extreme as a conspiracy of the ruling elite and at the other as a collection of masterpieces that transcend history and constitute, in Matthew Arnold's terms, 'the best that is known and thought in the world'.³ Heaney's success hardly suggests any headlong flight from the canonical (whatever the fears and hopes of contestants, conservative or radical, in the culture wars over the future of the curriculum), and can be used to make two observations. First, it illustrates how writers frequently themselves take the lead in canon-making. In *Inferno* 4 Dante, a great lover of lists of the famous dead, recounts how in Limbo he mingles with the *bella scuola*, the excellent school, of five great classical poets, 'masters of exalted song', Homer (whom in fact he had never read), Virgil hailed as '*l'altissimo poeta*', Horace, Ovid and Lucan, and by implication claims equality with them: 'They made me one of their company so that I was sixth among those great intellects' (1011–2). Authors elect their own precursors, by allusion, quotation, imitation, translation, homage, at once creating a canon and making a claim for their own inclusion in it.⁴ So, in the *Georgics*, Virgil himself gathers into a single work features of the various strands of non-narrative *epos* (Hesiodic, technical, philosophical), thereby in effect making his own work the climax of a Graeco-Roman 'didactic' tradition. Secondly, the case of Heaney reminds us that canonical flourishing is always and necessarily sustained by and within institutions which enable dissemination (which include in this case publishing houses, the media, schools and universities, literary prizes like the Nobel Prize for Literature). In consequence such flourishing is never simply a matter of intrinsic aesthetic merit but is necessarily also implicated in a range of socio-economic and (in the broad sense) political factors; we cannot wholly

³ Arnold (1964: 33).

⁴ See Ricks (2002).

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separate great books from the wider culture in which they have been, and are, embedded. The medievalist E. R. Curtius begins his discussion of the canon thus: ‘The formation of a canon serves to safeguard a tradition ... the literary tradition of the school, the juristic tradition of the state, and the religious tradition of the Church: these are the three medieval world powers, *studium, imperium, sacerdotium*.’⁵ A canon established which texts were to be accorded authority and also ensured an authorised interpretation of them. Quintilian, who, in Book 10 of his *Institutio oratoria*, listed the ‘best’ authors both Greek and Latin in all the major genres for the practical benefit of the rising orator (with Virgil providing ‘the most auspicious opening’, *auspicatissimum exordium*, for the Latin writers), uses the phrase *ordo a grammaticis datus*, ‘the corpus of accepted writers given by the scholars of literature’ (10.1.54); significantly *ordo* is the word for a social grouping within a hierarchy (thus the senatorial ‘order’), just as ‘classic’ was first used by Aulus Gellius to denote ‘a first-class and tax-paying author, not a proletarian’.⁶ The connections between the literary and the social and the political are inscribed within the very vocabulary of canon-making.

It is entirely appropriate that in 1997 Virgil should have been the first classical poet to obtain a whole volume in the Cambridge Companions series, since, if we look at the last 2,000 years, it is hard not to agree with T. S. Eliot’s description of him as ‘the classic of all Europe’.⁷ This is not to say that he is the greatest European poet (some would argue for the rival claims of, say, Homer or Ovid or Dante or Shakespeare), rather that he occupied the central place in the literary canon for the whole of Europe for longer than any other writer. As a result Virgil’s significance extends far beyond his influence (massive as it is) on other writers and artists, itself something that can only be gestured towards in this book. For example as the poet of empire – given the importance, for worse or for better, of the European imperial project – he speaks, at least on the most influential readings of his works, for many of the values and attitudes that have shaped the Latin West. When Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 800, the *translatio imperii*, the transfer of the Roman Empire to the Franks, was accompanied by an analogous *translatio studii*, the scholarly appropriation of the Roman past, with Virgil at its core; the two acts of succession are indeed profoundly implicated in each other. Similarly Camões turned to Virgil for the *Lusiads*, his poem justifying Portuguese global expansion.⁸ In that sense poems like

⁵ Curtius (1953: 256, ch. 14, ‘Classicism’).

⁶ Curtius (1953: 249). On Gellius’ use of the term ‘classic’, see Citroni (2005).

⁷ Eliot (1957: 70 (‘What Is a Classic?’)).

⁸ Andrew Laird and others have charted the colonial resonances of new world Latin. See e.g. Laird (2006).

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the *Aeneid* have effects beyond the literary, can even, in Mandelstam's memorable words, 'get people killed'. Analogously a piece of landscaping like Henry Hoare's garden at Stourhead, or the paintings of Claude that in part inspired it, are not Virgilian merely in the sense that they allude to events and persons in the *Aeneid*; rather this whole way of seeing and shaping the 'natural' world is profoundly informed by a particular response to Virgil's texts. The traces of Virgil are everywhere in European culture whether recognised or not; and in that sense Virgil should be of interest both to traditionalists who espouse the timeless value of great poetry and to radicals alert to the ideological work performed by 'literature' within history.⁹ Not without reason did the Austrian Catholic writer Theodore Haecker, socialist and staunch anti-fascist, call his popular and influential book on the poet first published in 1931 *Vergil. Vater des Abendlandes: Virgil. Father of the West*.

As we have seen, for Eliot the link between Dante and Virgil was central to European civilisation, a link which thus became, in Frank Kermode's words, 'a sort of key to his historical imagination',¹⁰ with Roman culture as a prefiguration, a *figura*, of Christian culture. This view of Virgil as *anima naturaliter Christiana* ('a soul by nature Christian'), in Tertullian's famous phrase, and a bridge between pagan and Christian Europe has of course a venerable ancestry; the Fourth Eclogue was early read as a prophecy of the Incarnation, while Aeneas became 'the prototype of a Christian hero'.¹¹ Eliot did not suppose, any more than Dante himself, that Virgil was in any way conscious of these things. Virgil's works can be read under the aspect of time, but also under the aspect of the timeless; neither reading excludes the other, and neither reading is adequate without the other. One can argue that what Eliot does here overtly is what any interpreter of past texts does – and must do. The Christianising interpretation of Virgil is thus not less historical than any other, it is simply *differently* historical; all historical narratives, it can be claimed, depend on teleological structures, however concealed, as a very condition of their possibility, and all historical narratives involve a simultaneous double reading of the past, backwards and forwards at the same time. If the Eliotic narrative seems different from other, 'secular' narratives, that is only because the ideological entailments of that teleology and that double reading are made explicit and because, in this explicit Christian form, they are no longer acceptable to many of Eliot's readers.

There is an important connection between Virgil's status as a classic and his imperial vision (visible even as early as the *Eclogues*): as Kermode

⁹ For reception as a way into Virgilian studies in a German context, see Gleii (1997).

¹⁰ Kermode cited in Reeves (1989: 1).

¹¹ Eliot (1957: 128).

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observes (quoting from the final section of Eliot's 'Burnt Norton'), 'The classic, like the Empire, must be thought of as "timeless ... except in the aspect of time".'¹² Both classic and empire exist within history, but also transcend history, evincing both permanence and change and enabling us to grasp, or at least to experience in practice, the relationship between them. This shuttle between the aspect of time and the aspect of the timeless is operative at some level within any act of interpretation, and constitutes, we might say, an organising principle of the *Aeneid* itself. One could take an episode analysed by a number of contributors to this volume, the account of Aeneas at the site of Rome (8.306–61), where Aeneas walks over spots hallowed in later Roman history, and Virgil superimposes on Evander's rustic settlement the stately buildings of his own day, contrasting the pastoral simplicity of Pallanteum with the contemporary grandeur of Rome. The narrator draws our attention to both difference (*then* a wooded spot, *now* the golden Capitol, 347–8) and continuity (*even then* the Capitol was instinct with divinity). Finally Virgil shades a third layer on to the other two, when Aeneas sees the remains of ancient cities, their walls collapsed, monuments of the men of old, citadels built by Saturn and Janus. A reading which emphasises the aspect of time produces a narrative either of progress or decline. An optimistic version would give us the rise of Rome from primitive settlement to mistress of the world with an empire without end. A pessimistic version would give us a reversed trajectory, as pastoral idyll gives way to imported luxury and modern vulgar display; or such might be the implication of lines 360–1 where cattle low in what will be a fashionable district of the city, the 'chic' Carinae (*lautis Carinis*). The *nunc/olim* figure in 348 is itself ambiguous since *olim* can refer to past or future: either 'golden now, once densely wooded' or 'golden now, one day to be densely wooded'.¹³ So it is not only a matter of whether we prefer woods or gold; the trajectory of history is itself unclear, either from gold to woods or vice versa, and the lines might allow us to see beyond Augustan grandeur to a return to the wild. *Nunc* may introduce a further wavering, since it could mean 'now in Virgil's day' or 'now in Aeneas' day', and 'golden' could be literal or metaphorical, 'belonging to a golden time' or 'made of gold/gilded'. In this way a more complex narrativisation would give us *cycles* of growth and decay; so too ancient cities powerful long ago are ruined already in the time of Aeneas, perhaps thereby portending the eventual fall of Rome itself. On the other hand we might prefer to read the whole passage under the aspect of the timeless; then all the elements in Virgil's description can

¹² Kermode (1975/1983: 60).

¹³ I owe this point to a lecture by J. E. G. Zetzel. See Chapter 15 in this volume.

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be held together synchronically. Rome the eternal city is always both the world capital, *caput rerum*, the metropolis which Augustus found brick and left marble, and 'sweet especial rural scene', both the *res publica* restored by political and military might and the place where an Age of Gold can be renewed. Such a Rome, itself a new Troy, could be simultaneously always both standing proud and yet in embryo or in ruins. Bruno Snell in a famous essay argued that Virgil discovered a spiritual landscape which he called Arcadia;¹⁴ analogously Aeneas' visit to Pallanteum discloses a spiritual city which Europeans have always called Rome. So too a literary classic, like the Virgilian *imperium*, is both here-and-now and eternal. But of course such a timeless synchrony can in turn be challenged by appeals to the aspect of time.¹⁵

All readings of past texts, even those claiming 'historical accuracy', are representable as acts of appropriation. But an unusual and unusually evident openness to appropriation, so that the meaning of the text is configured within the value system and personal life-history of the individual reader, seems throughout the centuries to have been a particular feature of the response to Virgil, reaching its extreme point in the practice of the *sortes Vergilianae*, a practice whose efficacy has been amply confirmed by the historical record: a passage, arbitrarily chosen and torn from its context, could possess readers to the extent of revealing, and shaping, their futures. The most familiar examples concern famous men (for example Charles I during the Civil War, who consulted a copy of Virgil in the Bodleian Library in Oxford). But in 1783 Dr Johnson's friend Hester Thrale, agonising over whether to marry the Italian musician Gabriel Piozzi and go with him to Italy, against the opposition of family and friends, 'seeing a very fine Virgil was tempted to open it with something of a superstitious intention by way of trying the *sortes Vergilianae*: the book spontaneously opened where Turnus welcomes Camilla, and fixing his fine eyes upon her cries out with a mixture of admiration and gratitude *O decus Italiae* etc. I thought it a good omen.' Perhaps we have here a back-door way (not without irony) of appropriating in a 'female' amatory context the authority of a venerated writer much less accessible to women readers than to men, or at any rate less accessed by them.¹⁶ We can represent this prophetic conception, constantly lurking

¹⁴ 'Arcadia: The Discovery of a Spiritual Landscape', in Snell (1953: 281–309). The chapter was first published as an essay in German in 1945, and exerted a huge influence for the remainder of the century. Snell was answered by E. A. Schmidt in 1975 in 'Arcadia: Modern Occident and Classical Antiquity', included in Volk (2008a).

¹⁵ See also Feeney (2007: 162–8).

¹⁶ Thrale (1942: I, 560–1). For an example in fiction see Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda* (1801: ch. 13). I am indebted to Jackie Pearson for these references. In a review of *Oxford Readings in Virgil's Aeneid*, George Steiner (1990) observes that of the

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within Virgil's reception history, in rather more orthodox terms using the words of Ronald Knox in *Let Dons Delight* (1939): 'Virgil – he has the gift, has he not, of summing up in a phrase used at random the aspiration and the tragedy of minds he could never have understood; that is the real poetic genius.'¹⁷ So Helen Waddell found comfort in Virgil in the face of the Nazi threat:

It was expedient that Rome should die. For one must die to become a legend: and the Roman legend was the inspiration of Europe. It is a strange thing to remember that in the meridian of her power, she herself looked back to her beginnings in a conquered city and a burning town: and the man who gave her immortality was the hollow-cheeked sad-eyed Virgil of the Hadrumetum mosaic. If all else goes from the schools, let us at least keep the second book of Virgil. I speak of it with passion, for something sent me to it on that September afternoon when the Luftwaffe first broke through the defences of London, and that night it seemed as though London and her river burned. You remember the cry of Aeneas waking in the night, the rush, arming as he went, the hurried question – 'Where's the fighting now?' – and the answer:

Come is the ending day, Troy's hour is come,
 The ineluctable hour.
 Once were we Trojan men,
 And Troy was once, and once a mighty glory
 Of the Trojan race.¹⁸

For reasons such as these this volume devotes an unusual degree of emphasis to Virgil's reception within European culture (hence the choice of the traditional spelling Virgil rather than the more 'correct' Vergil). Virgil, or 'Virgil' (the very name can be regarded as a trope), even if he should not be wholly collapsed into what his readers have made of him, can never be the originary, reified text-in-itself that too many classical scholars fantasise about uncovering. Despite the impact of the theory wars, the view is still commonly encountered, not least in departments of Classics, that the only proper meaning of a text is its original meaning which the modern scholar tries to restore (usually identified with the hypothetical intentions of the author and responses of the first readers); whereas the history of its reception becomes largely a history of the errors that we have outgrown. By contrast,

twenty-six papers none are by women. The male dominance of twentieth-century Virgilian scholarship could be said to replicate the marginalization of women within Virgil's own texts (even the unforgettable Dido must die). This Companion represents an advance in this respect, though we are still far from equality. See Cox (2011) and also Ellen Oliensis, Chapter 23 in this volume.

¹⁷ Cited by Stephen Medcalf, 'Virgil at the Turn of Time', in Martindale (1984: 222).

¹⁸ Waddell (1976: 40 and 43).

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in the historicised version of reception theory pioneered by the Constance school in Germany the meaning and interpretation of texts is inseparable from what readers and reading communities, employing particular reading practices, have made of them, and in this way reception-history becomes hermeneutically vital. Antiquity cannot be studied merely *in itself*, because there is always a 'fusion of horizons' (in Hans-Georg Gadamer's somewhat awkward metaphor) between text and interpreter. It is not merely that in practice we cannot read Virgil like a Roman (which Roman?); it would not be desirable if we could, since it would no longer be 'we' who were doing the reading.¹⁹ Interpretation is situated, contingent upon time and place and ideological preconception, is always made from within history. The point seems so obvious as to be not worth labouring were it not that scholars often ignore it when it comes to their own interpretations. Stephen Harrison in his survey of twentieth-century Virgilian scholarship writes of the so-called Harvard Pessimists, who stressed the darker aspects of the *Aeneid* and the poem's sense of the cost of imperialism, 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'.²⁰ But something similar could be said of all readings; any reading can be historicised in an analogous fashion. Moreover it is not clear that the history of interpretation is best figured as a history of progress; a comparison of (for example) the classical scholar David West's Penguin translation of the *Aeneid* with the version of Dryden does not suggest that West is in any simple sense a 'better' reader of Virgil, even if he is possession of certain scholarly data that Dryden did not have. The mistake of scholars is to suppose that the discourses within which they work are the only ones that can deliver valid 'findings'. For example the view that the *Aeneid* must be understood in relation to its sources is taken as the only 'natural' or 'appropriate' one. Yet did not the Greekless Dante effect one of the two or three most powerful and exciting readings of Virgil – what Harold Bloom, who argues that all readings can be construed as 'misreadings' (either strong or weak), would call a 'strong misreading'²¹ – in the *Divine Comedy*, his own narrative revision of the *Aeneid*?

¹⁹ For this view of reading, see especially Gadamer (1975). A more productive metaphor might be interpretation as dialogue. For a fuller exploration of these arguments, see Martindale (1993a).

²⁰ Harrison (1990: 5). However, this interpretation does not fit easily the chronology. For the so-called 'Harvard School' controversy, see Hejduk (2017).

²¹ Bloom (1973).

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This is not to say that reception-theorists, any more than other interpreters, can escape the shuttle between temporality and timelessness that I described earlier. Kermode calls Eliot's theory of tradition 'Cubist historiography, unlearning the trick of perspective and ordering history as a system of perpetually varying spatial alignments',²² in which apparent opposites, tradition and novelty, classicism and modernism, change and stasis, can co-exist. A canon is precisely where the diachronic is organised into a synchrony, or, to put the point in the more Eliotic terms I have been employing, where the aspect of time is reconciled with the aspect of the timeless. Thus a secular canon, as much as a religious canon, has metaphysical entailments – with some reason Bloom doubts whether, in high literature, secularisation has ever taken place.²³ And indeed Virgil operates for the committed Virgilian like a sacred book, endlessly repaying meditation, and part of a system of belief and cognition; it is not so much that Virgil imitates, effectively, an extra-literary world as that, for the lover of Virgil, the experience of the world, including the experience of other people, is significantly informed by his works. A canon is an assertion of what is valuable *for us*, and we need canons both because we cannot read everything and because we have no choice but to make value judgements about what we read. We organise the synchrony as a way of showing that our experience of the texts (which, to be sure, originated historically) is *our* experience. One obvious sense in which a classic like the *Aeneid* could be described as 'timeless' is its capacity (itself a function of its reception) for constant reinscription within new temporal contexts, what Derrida called a work's 'iterability'. In this process the 'same' text means differently, and in that sense is not the same; or rather it is precisely this sameness-in-difference and difference-in-sameness that is the mark of a classic.

Some of these points can be illustrated by further consideration of the political significance of the poems, an issue that remains at the centre of much discussion. Are the poems firmly pro-Augustan, or are they in some sense a critique of empire and emperor? And if Virgil indeed wrote in support of an autocratic regime, does this compromise the value of those writings? A history of the British reception of the *Aeneid* from 1600 shows how the politics of the poem are always interconnected with the politics of talking about it. A necessarily simplified narrative might go something like this.²⁴ In the early seventeenth century the *Aeneid* was widely regarded as the greatest

²² Kermode (1968: 229).

²³ Bloom (1995: 247).

²⁴ See in particular Harrison (1967); for the quotations see 11 and 85. For an account of the importance of reception to the political interpretation of the *Aeneid*, see White (1993: 95–109).