Introduction

Do not let me hear
Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly.
T. S. Eliot, *East Coker*

What did poets in the Renaissance know – or think they knew – about Virgil, and how did they interpret his major poems? It is an important question: for students of Spenser, Tasso, Ronsard, and Ariosto, because Virgil was the poet they all imitated; and for classicists, because this period was a pivotal one in the history of their field. The disciplines as we know them today, of archaeology, paleography, epigraphy, numismatics, and textual criticism, all date from the Renaissance, and Virgil was a test case for most of them. Piety aside, and scholarship too, what became of Virgil in the Renaissance – how he was received and how his poems were recycled – is an instance of something that occurs to every classic when it outlives its original context: when the institutions of religious and civil life from which it drew inspiration, and to which it gave substance in return, recede from it like the waters of a dying sea. The text becomes stranded. The words remain, but in the absence of institutions their meaning becomes unsponsored – until they are buoyed up once more on new tides, of new ideas and new institutions.

It is a rich tale and strange, even for one poet, and when that poet is Virgil, a central author in the European tradition, the interest – and the intricacy – are both magnified. The goal of this book is to chart the big picture: to construct a map of the whole field, which students can use and scholars can argue with. For the Middle Ages, this was done more than a hundred years ago by Domenico Comparetti. His *Virgilio nel medio evo* was the first major work of scholarship on Virgil's post-classical, pre-Enlightenment reception and, when non-specialists want to gesture at the subject, it is still the one book that everyone has heard of. Published in 1872 and translated in 1895, its errors have been chastened, its omissions supplied,

but it has never been replaced.[1] There are better books, but none with the same breadth.[2]

There ought to have been a sequel, *Virgil in the Renaissance*. Vladimiro Zabughin came close, with *Vergilio nel Rinascimento italiano da Dante a Torquato Tasso: fortuna, studi, imitazioni, traduzioni e parodie, iconografia* (1921, 1923). Zabughin is more reliable than Comparetti, and there is still much in his two volumes that is not available elsewhere. Zabughin did not succeed, however, in writing the companion to Comparetti. He restricted himself to figures in Italy and he was never translated. Since Zabughin there have been many specialized studies, of which the most important are Craig Kallendorf's books on reception and epideictic rhetoric, book production in Venice, readership in Venice and, most recently, pessimistic readings of the *Aeneid* in the Renaissance which seem to anticipate the Harvard school.[3] Kallendorf's basic tool is the case study, in the tradition of Arnaldo Momigliano and Anthony Grafton.

This book has different aims and, where appropriate, different methods. Without skimping on particulars, it is meant to be panoramic: a survey, in the best sense, of what readers across Europe thought about Virgil and the meaning of his poems. For Virgil in painting and sculpture, there is already an excellent overview,[4] but on the literary side there is still room, even need, for synthesis: not just for summary, but for stepping back, taking stock, seeing trends. What did poets in the Renaissance believe about Virgil, and when they wrote poems modeled on his, what did they think they were imitating?

These are big questions. The answers proposed here, even if they find acceptance, are sure to be debated, modified, and (in some cases) abandoned. That is how scholarship progresses. In what follows, I have done my best to be accurate. But accuracy, by itself, is not enough: of embroidery and elaboration there is no end. What's required at this stage is structure.

[1] See Jan M. Ziolkowski, "The Making of Domenico Comparetti's *Vergil in the Middle Ages*," in *Vergil in the Middle Ages*, trans. E. F. M. Benecke (repr. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. vii–xxxvii.

[2] Cf. W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature* (London, 1896); the scholarship is very dated, but for coverage it still has no equal.

[3] See my review of Craig Kallendorf, *Virgil and the Myth of Venice: Books and Readers in the Italian Renaissance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) in *Modern Philology* 100 (2002), 75–79. Kallendorf's *The Other Virgil: "Pessimistic" Readings of the* Aeneid *in Early Modern Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007) is a sequel.

[4] Bernadette Pasquier, *Virgile illustré de la renaissance à nos jours en France et en Italie* (Paris: Touzot, 1992); see also Werner Suerbaum, *Handbuch der illustrierten Vergil-Ausgaben, 1502–1840* (Hildesheim: Olms, 2008).

METHOD

There have been scores if not centuries of books on Renaissance epic, most of which begin with a chapter on what the classical poets, Virgil especially, really meant. There is no such chapter here, not to be coy or disguise any bias, but because, for our purpose, it doesn't matter what Virgil actually meant, much less what this reader thinks about him. Too many books on the reception of classical authors have been spoilt by tracing the scholar's preferred explanation of the text through the ages, until it becomes revealed in its full glory by the scholar himself, his teacher, or his school. A sure symptom is when scholars praise authors in the Renaissance for being ahead of their time. It is usually better, though, not to worry overmuch about separating the wheat from the tares, the progressive ideas about Virgil from the dead ends of literary scholarship. Once we start, it is too easy to dismiss an idea, simply because it doesn't appeal to us or conform with our expectations. Poets, moreover, have been known to use those dead ends, while the correct notions that we cherish in our bosom were gathering dust in disregard, spending their sweetness on the desert air. The important thing, for understanding poetry based on Virgil, is the idea of Virgil in the mind of the poet imitating him: not what Virgil wrote, necessarily, but what Virgil seemed to intend, to that poet.

In the twentieth century, the concept of authorial intention became suspect to many critics. Fortunately for us, the death of the author did not occur until after the great Renaissance poets had already written their masterpieces. The scholars they read discuss intention directly and without embarrassment.[5] Renaissance readers did not always agree about what Virgil's intention was, but they assumed he had one, and they recorded it in writing: through letters, marginalia, printed commentaries, treatises on literary theory, and lectures on literary criticism. To some degree, the poetry that they wrote in imitation of Virgil is also a record of interpretation,[6] but that kind of evidence is hard to use, because imitations were supposed to overgo or even correct their sources. For example, how can we tell when Tasso is interpreting Virgil, and when he is trying to supersede him? We can read Tasso's prose, but some critics do not trust even that. In what follows,

[5] Examples will follow. For the history of *intentio* as a category in literary criticism, see A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Scolar, 1984), chs. 1 and 3.

[6] See Charles Martindale, *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), chs. 2–3.

then, imitations are restricted to illustrating how an interpretation could be used, not invoked as evidence for its existence.

When I first began writing about this subject, my primary aim was to avoid anachronism. For example, when quoting a classical text, I made a point of using a Renaissance edition whenever possible. The Loeb of Virgil is not a bad translation or even a bad text, but when Spenser composed *The Faerie Queene*, the Loeb Classical Library did not exist. For classicists, OCT and Teubner editions are more respectable, but they didn't exist either. In practice, it matters less for Virgil's text, which has been relatively stable over the centuries, than for authors who were lost during the Middle Ages and whose texts were retrieved, often in corrupt or mutilated form, during the lifetimes of Petrarch and Poggio. Catullus is now a well-known example,[7] and Quintilian should be. Reading them in Renaissance editions, one admires the tenacity of those early scholars who must have struggled through them, and raises at the same time a prayer of thanks for the editors who came afterward and made the texts readable again for mortals such as ourselves. If we want to read the same classics that our poets read, and especially if we want to make arguments about word choice or even verb tense, we need to read them in the bad, old, beautifully printed, sometimes horribly corrupt editions that Ariosto and Ronsard would have owned and studied. This is even more true for authors whose texts have been reduced in size by recent scholarship. I shall say more on this in Chapter 2, when we consider Aelius Donatus, whose *Life of Virgil* was longer in the Renaissance, more corrupt, and more colorful.

Most of the time, in practice, it makes no difference. Still, we have to check. Even when the authors are ancient, we can never be sure what they "said" in the Renaissance unless we consult them in a Renaissance edition or, for Greek authors such as Aristotle, a Latin translation from the Renaissance (since that would be the form that most readers absorbed him in).

As a rule, printers gave more care to proofreading classical texts than commentaries. Since the prose of commentaries is usually straightforward, a sentence that is unintelligible is often a sign of corruption. The problem can frequently be solved by comparing another edition (preferably an independent one) of the same commentary. Sometimes, though, the corruption is not obvious; or the printer has shortened the commentary, and a later edition is not complete. The best practice, therefore, is to compare several editions, preferably with a range of dates, for every quotation. That is

[7] See Julia Haig Gaisser, *Catullus and His Renaissance Readers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), ch. 1.

getting easier now that libraries are digitizing their old books and putting them online; we must do what we can with the tools that are available.

Textual anachronism (i.e., quoting classical texts from an edition that didn't exist yet) is something that can and should be avoided. But what about interpretations: can they be anachronistic as well and, if so, should they be eliminated? There are many articles and books on Renaissance epic which assume that the meaning of Virgil's text is self-evident and stable through time: that of course Ariosto, because he is intelligent, would have understood Virgil in the same, intelligent way that we do. Formulated that way, the assumption is patently ridiculous. If we read Ovid or Virgil in the editions and with the commentaries that Ariosto would probably have used, we will quickly find that some interpretations which we take for granted have not, in fact, always been obvious.[8]

However, just because it wasn't part of the scholarly tradition yet doesn't mean an interpretation was "unthinkable" by Ariosto. As Richard Strier argues, "We must strive to see traditional works against the backdrop of their traditions, not as merging indistinguishably into them."[9] Kallendorf's most recent book, *The Other Virgil*, gives numerous examples of scholars and especially poets who broke ranks with their contemporaries and read Virgil in ways that are similar to our own.[10]

What use, then, is researching the traditional interpretations if they weren't binding on poets? There is some value, first, in reminding ourselves that what seems, in our own limited circles (whether of conversation, colleagues, scholarship, or merely century) obvious, permanent, and unarguable is actually contingent, temporary, and hypothetical. By loosening our grip on the obvious, we become receptive to, capable of alternatives.

What the old commentaries are really good for, I have concluded, is not excluding "unthinkable" readings – what Rosemond Tuve called "'illegal' critical practices . . . and 'illegitimate' readings"[11] – but for uncovering what I think of as the "unguessables." There are some interpretations so perverse they would never have occurred to most of us in a hundred years of concentrated cerebration: for example, the bizarre notion discussed in Chapter 5 that Aeneas actually murdered one of his shipmates in order to propitiate demons. If we were separating the wheat from the tares, that would be one of the tares, surely. Yet this particular tare seems to have

[8] See Daniel Javitch, "Rescuing Ovid from the Allegorizers," *Comparative Literature* 30 (1978), 97–107; and Javitch, "The *Orlando Furioso* and Ovid's Revision of the *Aeneid*," *MLN* 99 (1984), 1023–36.
[9] Richard Strier, *Resistant Structures: Particularity, Radicalism, and Renaissance Texts* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), p. 25.
[10] Kallendorf, *The Other Virgil*. [11] Qtd. in Strier, *Resistant Structures*, p. 17.

rooted itself in the receptive soil of Petrarch's brain; ergo, it is useful to know about, even if we ourselves don't make bread with it.

Finding out what people did not think – proving a negative – is often impossible. As we shall see in Chapter 1, the amount of commentary that Virgil's text generated in the Renaissance was and is genuinely overwhelming, even if we ignore materials in manuscript. Even after years of study, the most one can usually say about an opinion is, "It wasn't *widely* held" or "It wasn't mentioned by any of the more *popular* commentators." Usually, though, we don't start that way, looking for a negative. Ordinarily the only way we notice what the commentators *don't* talk about is by actively looking for something and not finding it. It's a frustrating experience, but if we can let go of what we "know" about Virgil – of what we think the commentators ought to have said – it can also be an opportunity. When absence acquires an outline, when darkness becomes visible, the vacua stand out, like black holes in a sea of stars. We can regard them as opacities, obstacles to a desired conclusion; or, if we have grace to use them so, as information, clues. Sometimes it is the voids that reveal most dramatically what is different. A couple of examples are the category of Hellenistic poetry, which did not exist in the Renaissance (and which I touch on in Chapter 1), and the anger of Aeneas, about which there is less to say in Chapter 6 than one might wish. We can complain about the thickheadedness of our ancestors or (what is worse) we can leverage some little scrap of evidence to mean something we approve of. But that is partisanship, not scholarship. Better to ask, when we don't find what we were looking for, what there is instead, and resolve to become interested in that.

LACUNAE

In my account there will be some absences as well. A few of these are more apparent than real. Dido, for example, does not have her own chapter. She could have: in just the last fifteen years, there have been at least three major books on Dido all by herself.[12] What I have to say original about Dido has already been published elsewhere, and this allows me to be briefer here.[13] Also, Dido has a way of taking books over. With poems as rich as Virgil's, it

[12] Marilynn Desmond, *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval* Aeneid (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); John Watkins, *The Specter of Dido: Spenser and Virgilian Epic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Paola Bono and M. Vittoria Tessitore, *Il mito di Didone: avventure di una regina tra secoli e culture* (Milan: Mondadori, 1998).

[13] David Scott Wilson-Okamura, "Virgilian Models of Colonization in Shakespeare's *Tempest*," *ELH* 70 (2003), 709–37.

is impossible to talk about all of the episodes in a meaningful way. Instead, the discussion here is organized around problems, with episodes indexed at the back. This is why, for example, there are many pages on the underworld (in Chapter 5) and only several on Turnus (in Chapter 6). In the Renaissance, Turnus was a problem, but the underworld was an even bigger problem. With some episodes, such as Carthage, the discussion is spread over several chapters. In Chapter 1, I assess Landino's theory that Dido represents political ambition; in Chapter 5, her role as obstacle or temptation; and in Chapter 6, her role as foil for Lavinia.

Some terms are missing as well. I am grateful to Gérard Genette for coining the term *paratext*; nothing has done more to popularize the study of prefaces, woodcuts, marginalia, and commentary than giving them a collective existence and an exotic new name.[14] With the vocabulary, though, comes a theory of reading which I can subscribe to only half-heartedly, that the paratext is a kind of frame or threshold (*seuil*) which mediates between reader and text. As a teacher I've observed that readers frequently bypass the frame, by skipping introductions, ignoring footnotes, in extreme cases even by crossing out what they disagree with. I myself, for example, almost never read Spenser's dedicatory sonnets en route to *The Faerie Queene*. (It was different, I imagine, for the original dedicatees.) Sometimes the paratext is a threshold, and sometimes it is just extra paper. Here is another reason not to be doctrinaire about what kinds of interpretations were "thinkable" in the Renaissance: for someone who doesn't read what he's supposed to, almost anything is thinkable.

Another omission in this book is reception theory, or at least the theory most scholars are familiar with. The project of the Konstanz School, as represented by Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss, is to validate reading as a form of co-authorship. This is something, as Jauss points out, that critics have been doing for many centuries.[15] I am not trying, though, to rehabilitate the old readings, so much as argue for their importance in understanding old poetry. Idiotic or insightful does not matter: if an idea about Virgil had currency in the Renaissance, then we want to know about it, not so we can honor it (necessarily), but to interpret the poems, such as *Orlando furioso* and *The Faerie Queene*, that were formed under its influence. It is hard when writing reception history not to congratulate the old

[14] The word first appears in Genette's *Palimpsestes: la littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), p. 93; *Seuils* (Paris: Seuil, 1987) develops the concept and gives examples.

[15] Hans Robert Jauss, "The Theory of Reception: A Retrospective of its Unrecognized Prehistory," in *Literary Theory Today*, ed. Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 53–73.

commentators when they agree with us or, when they miss a seemingly obvious point, to curse their blind spots. But I have not tried to adjudicate between what I called a moment ago dead ends and what, looking back, seems progressive in Renaissance scholarship. This book is meant to be a survey of what poets in the Renaissance knew about Virgil, not a scorecard.

The last outleaving is *early modern*. This is handy, in place of *Renaissance*, when the rhythm of a sentence calls for an extra syllable, but in this book I have decided to avoid the term for three reasons. First, for our subject, the term *Renaissance* is more precise. Admittedly not everything that happened during the Renaissance was part of the Renaissance. Whatever it became, though, the Renaissance began as a movement in classical scholarship, and this book is about that movement. Second, *rinascimento*, "rebirth," is a term that was actually used in the Renaissance, whereas no one in any period has ever called him- or herself "early modern." If we want to understand an earlier period, it is helpful to employ at least some of the period's own vocabulary. Finally, I want to save the word *modern* for what seemed *modernus*, "timely," in the Renaissance itself. At one level, nothing had really changed: as we shall see, the idea of Virgil that was current in the sixteenth century is largely the same one as was current in the fourth and fourteenth centuries. This continuity – of classical, medieval, and Renaissance scholarship – is one of the book's two main theses. The second, not quite incompatible thesis is that some things at least seemed new. There were new manuscripts, new technologies, and, in poetry, a new ethos. Love, no less than war, was a subject that readers in the sixteenth century demanded from an epic, and this was felt to be modern, even though the taste for it had been developing since the High Middle Ages; I shall say more on this in Chapter 6.

MODELS

If classical scholarship is a dry subject sometimes, the history of classical scholarship can be positively arid. Following the example of Anthony Grafton, I have done what I can, especially in Chapter 1, to flesh out its actors. It is not necessary, for example, to know that Pierio Valeriano, a key figure in our story, also composed – in addition to works on iconography and textual criticism – a *Declamation in Favor of Bearded Priests* (1531). But these learned people, some of them, were also quite lively. Following Grafton again, I have not refrained from retelling some of the old stories that seemingly everyone has heard. A book that did refrain would be shorter, more knowing, and have a narrower audience. I do assume, on

the part of my readers, a knowledge of the *Aeneid* and an interest in Renaissance poetry. For the Renaissance epics, I do not give plot summaries, but most of what I say will be intelligible even to someone who has not read them yet; at least, it would be strange if someone finished this book and did not absorb something of their substance. Here my model was C. S. Lewis, who by writing about *The Faerie Queene* made me want to read it.

This is an academic book, with footnotes. I have tried, nevertheless, to imitate certain popular historians, Barbara Tuchman, Norman Cantor, and Jacques Barzun. They did not deliver the last words in any of their respective fields, but they did not neglect, either, the scholar's task of striving, in spite of difficulty and without dismissing details, to grasp their subjects as a whole. They were not satisfied, as we say now, merely to "complicate" the discussion. They did not say everything they knew, or cite everything they had read, merely to show they had read it.

In choosing examples, I have cast a wide net. It would, I recognize, be possible and even desirable to compose a book about Virgil in the Renaissance by writing a chapter on each of the major poets who imitated him; that would have the advantage of specificity. But it would still leave many gaps. The alternative is to read as much and as widely as one can, and to identify what seems normal, central, common: "following," as Descartes says in his third *Discourse on Method*, "the most temperate opinions and the ones most distant from excess which are commonly received." Findings collected on this basis ought to be usable, not just for a handful of major poets, but for many minor poets as well. A byproduct of this procedure is that national differences are going to seem less evident than international trends. There was not, so far as I have found, an English Virgil distinct from an Italian or French Virgil. The underworld, for example, has the same range of meanings in Spenser as it does in Petrarch, Boiardo, Ronsard, and Ariosto. As we shall see in Chapter 1, poets in England used the same editions and the same commentators as poets in France and Italy. This is not to say that no one will ever discover national as well as international trends in Virgil's influence and reputation: under the microscope, even the smoothest plain will be seen to have ridges. The important thing is to view everything in perspective, and not to mistake ripples for tides.

To some, the focus on what was normal will seem boring, if not actually misbegotten. The history of classical scholarship, as an academic discipline, goes back to the eighteenth century, since when it has always been told in the form of highlights, as a series of turning points. That is both economical and dramatic. But most readers of Virgil, even most poets, have not been

great or even good classical scholars. They knew Latin, but their libraries were small. We are daunted sometimes by their learning, but their canon, even of classical texts, was not the same as ours. There was more Mantuan, less Homer, and (in England) almost no Dante. The plays of Sophocles and Aeschylus were available in print, but there were no early translations and only very advanced scholars could penetrate their still formidable language. Your first-year university student, with no Latin and less Greek, probably knows more about what is in *Oedipus Rex* than Spenser, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, and Shakespeare combined.

The task of this book is to discover what was widely known about Virgil, not just what could be known by specialists. In order to learn what commentaries were available and how frequently they appeared, I have relied on library catalogues and printed bibliographies. The best of these, as it happens, do not extend beyond 1599: this provides us with a *terminus ad quem* and precludes, unfortunately, any serious treatment of Dryden or Milton. As I shall show in Chapter 5, there is so much continuity with the ancient and medieval idea of Virgil that fixing a *terminus a quo* is less important.

PLAN

This book has three parts. Part I, Publication, uses the controversy over how to spell Virgil's name in order to survey the conditions of both classical scholarship and academic publishing. In its own way, it makes a small contribution to the history of the book, by tabulating (for one, canonical author) production over time and space. But the main purpose of the chapter is to establish which commentaries on Virgil were printed most often, and which commentaries were printed over the longest period. Without this knowledge, we could spend the rest of this book, and maybe the rest of our lives, reading randomly in rare, beautiful, and expensive books that had almost no impact. Along the way, we shall make a distinction between innovation in classical scholarship and actual influence.

Part II, Reputation, has three chapters: patronage, variety, and refinement. What was Virgil's image as a poet? What were his specialties? Where was he vulnerable to criticism? What was his relationship with Augustus? To which school of philosophy did he subscribe? How did he compare with previous Latin poets? With Homer? Was Virgil homosexual? While we are answering these questions, we shall also establish the parameters of interpretation for Virgil's *Eclogues* (in Chapter 2) and his *Georgics* (in Chapter 3).