INTRODUCTION

The first six books of the *Aeneid* have generally received more attention than the last six. This may be partly due to the comparative inaccessibility of books VII–XII in good modern editions, and partly also to the popularity of books II, IV and VI, each of which may be easily isolated. All of this is bound to have contributed to a persistent judgement of the poem. My main purpose in this essay is to try to re-establish the paramount value of books VII–XII as epic narrative. They represent, after all, Virgil's Iliad.[1] It is commonly agreed that Homer's *Iliad* surpasses his *Odyssey* in tragic intensity and in the power of its narrative. If this is so, and if *Aeneid* VII–XII is less successful than *Aeneid* I–VI, then Virgil must be judged to have proven inadequate to the greater artistic challenge when he came to it, and the *maius opus* becomes an empty rhetorical gesture. It seemed worth writing something which would argue the contrary case: that, far from constituting a falling off, *Aeneid* VII–XII is a continuous epic narrative of sustained power and grandeur, planned and executed on the largest scale and offering a structural unity which matches that of its great model.

I shall also argue that any reading of *Aeneid* VII–XII involves not only a reconsideration of the first half of the poem – thus, although book VI is a complete piece of narrative, the reader who has never gone on to book VII will make something quite different out of it from what will be made by a reader who is going on, or who has already gone on – but also a reconsideration of Homer's *Iliad*. To achieve a true sense of the meaning of the *Aeneid*, the reader must have a sense – it need

[1] The terms 'Odyssean' *Aeneid* and 'Iliadic' *Aeneid* are familiar from Brooks Otis, *Virgil: a Study in Civilised Poetry* (Oxford 1964) chs. vi, vii.

not, probably will not, be complete or precise – of what Homer's *Iliad* meant to the implied reader of the *Aeneid* and to Virgil himself.

No book in the second half of the poem can be satisfactorily detached from the continuous texture of the narrative whole. At no point until the last sentence of book XII can we reach a complete reading of the poem and make sense of it as a history of human experience. And it is through this sense of significant unity which the Virgilian Iliad elicits from the reader that he is finally able to construct a significance not just for the last six books but retrospectively for the whole epic. The tragic tensions, the loftily overarching historical suspensions and resolutions of Virgil's Iliad should strike the reader with a force which extends back to the now distant earlier books and to the first days of the hero's trials and sufferings, *multum . . . et terris iactatus et alto*, when he stood on the north African littoral and gazed in Juno's temple at the murals of the Trojan war, the heroic conflict which he had, albeit traumatically, come through. There he saw himself depicted in the thick of battle, in close combat with the Achaian chieftains, *se quoque principibus permixtum agnouit Achiuis*. Aeneas did not know then that he would soon be again at war. And in book VIII, when he gazed in wonder and surmise at the scenes depicted on the shield, he could not still, and would not ever, complete the significance of what he saw. That he leaves to the reader. His own renewed conflict lay immediately ahead, the conflicts on the shield in a different order of temporality.

The murals in Juno's temple in the first 'Odyssean' book constitute one of the poem's most important motifs. Everything Aeneas sees there as over and done with – slaughter, sacrilege, destruction – he will live through again: first in his own retrospective narrative of the last days of Troy, the tragic power of which is secured by the shift into a first-person narrative and the interposition of a reader–hearer who is herself emotionally involved with the narrator and waiting to play a tragic role herself inside the temporality of

the poem's primary narrative scheme; and then again in the poem's Iliadic closing books, the narrative of the Italian campaign. The reader's sense and recollection of book I will be transformed in memory and become part of his final sense of the whole epic, the perspectives of which extend from the hero, focus of all the poem's temporalities, and from all the other characters, the *mezzi* and *impedimenti*,[2] the facilitators and impediments of his mission, Creusa, Anchises, Dido, Latinus, Evander, Mezentius, Camilla, Nisus, Euryalus, Turnus.

A whole new cast of characters, new locations, a new start, are signalled by the narrator in book VII – *maius opus moueo* – yet the reader does not start all over again, for the same hero unites the whole, and in the huge transition bridging the two halves moves out of the sixth book, with its dreams of past and future, its rivers of fantasy, into the seventh, with its massive build-up of local realities beside the Tiber. Among the new characters, slipping in at the very end of VII, is Camilla, who will dominate XI: she will recall to the reader not only Dido and Cleopatra, heroic, doomed and deceived, but also the virgin huntress, the Amazon Penthesilea who came to help the Trojans after Hector's death and was killed by Achilles. Thus the reader of VII–XII looks back as Aeneas looked back; the experience of reading VII–XII will modify his sense of I–VI.

Virgil must have known Homer by heart. He thought deeply and philosophically about the meaning of history and the life and suffering of humanity. He saw the past, as his readers must, not only diachronically but also synchronically. An epic poem is temporal and dynamic; yet it is also spatial, the reader moves through it as through a location, turning back and retracing his steps when he wishes as Aeneas retraced his steps on that last fatal night in Troy. But all the time, the momentum of the reading of any long narrative must be forward, must be towards the end. We must want to get to the end as much as Aeneas did.

> hic labor extremus, longarum haec meta uiarum.

[2] See Tasso, *Discorso . . . del Poema Eroico.*

And though the end comes last, we may infer it any moment not only from previous readings of the poem, if any, but from a continual awareness that Virgil is not merely alluding to the *Iliad*, but redeploying it, almost, in a sense, overlaying it with his own visionary misreading or (at the least) recension of it.[3] For the modern reader, to try to make sense of the *Aeneid* without continual recourse to Homer is like trying to read a code whose secret is lost. 'The meaning of a text depends upon other texts which it absorbs and transforms.'[4]

Virgil might have treated the official Augustan myth of Aeneas as a piece of Callimachean aitiology. He decided not to do so, but to attempt a recension of both the Homeric epics, with Aeneas replaying the roles of Achilles, Hector and Odysseus. He thus ensured the survival of heroic epic as a serious form for another millennium and a half. Charming though it is, one cannot take the *Argonautica* of Apollonius seriously as an essential anterior text to the *Aeneid*. Virgil obliged the sophisticated reader to take heroic epic seriously, he obliged Europe to go on reckoning with Homer even when most of Europe could not read him. The *Aeneid* casts a retrospective light on the structural and metaphorical achievements of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Matthew Arnold's view of poetry, in which Homer is great not because he is *naïf* or primitive but because he is an artist of high seriousness, is directly derived from his reading of Virgil, who may indeed be seen to have rescued his great model, with true vatic foresight, from the fallacies of primitivism and historicism which, many centuries later, clouded a proper reading of Homer and caused foolish scholastic distinctions to be drawn between Homer and Virgil, obscuring even for the enlightened the true nature and scope of Virgil's *imitatio*.[5]

No one writing about Virgil can fail to be conscious of the weight of past scholarship, criticism and exegesis. Yet anyone

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[3] 'Each poet must slay his poetic father.' Harold Bloom, quoted in J. Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (London 1981) 13.
[4] Culler, *Pursuit* 104.
[5] For these we may go back to Quintilian, *I.O.* l. 46–51, 85–6. 'Virgil comes second to Homer, but nearer first than third.'

who allowed himself to be too much aware of this would never write about Virgil at all. My chief debt will be obvious. I have tried to follow the work of Knauer[6] by producing a study of *Aeneid* VII–XII as a seamless whole, the second half of a *carmen perpetuum*. Most recent studies of the *Aeneid* have concentrated on key passages and drawn from them sets of interpretative principles, a 'reading'. I have sought no such principles. I start, and end, with a single ungainsayable fact, that the *Aeneid* is an *imitatio* of the two epics of Homer, the most notable instance, probably, in European literature of 'intertextuality'.[7] I have not been able wholly to resist the temptation, which nearly all writers on Virgil have found irresistible, to indulge in a little speculation in my final pages, but I hope I have kept this self-indulgence to an acceptable minimum. Antiquarian and allegorical exegesis have also been reduced to the minimum.

I have, however, been indebted to work done on narrative by critics outside the field of classical study. Some of these ideas have produced shifts of emphasis which are stimulating and perhaps valuable to readers of any long narrative text. I see no reason why any narrative should be exempt from such scrutiny (however imperfect) just because it is written in Latin.

Commentators on ancient texts have traditionally concentrated on explaining the meanings of words and sentences: understandably, since only a few people know much Latin or Greek and because so much of the pagan past must remain strange and remote to us. But the emphasis on words and phrases is bound to slow the reader down to walking pace, is bound to stress the difficulties of the language. A reader of the *Aeneid* can be detained for ages (and pages) by notes on words like *enim* which, while models of learning, impede the reader's sense of the narrative. Anyone who has tried to teach long narrative texts in Latin will, I believe, confirm that many pupils cannot see the wood for the trees and often fail to reach

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[6] G. N. Knauer, *Die Aeneis und Homer* (Göttingen 1964).
[7] Culler, *Pursuit* 101–18.

any sense of the structure and movement of narrative. They lose all sense of what is happening and of the processes by which what is happening is presented. In the words of a recent writer, 'without complementing the verbal by a wider structural approach, how can one explain such features as constellations of personae, juxtaposition of larger narrative sections . . . the possible effects of narrative pace?'[8] The 'presented world' of the narrative must be realised by the reader through the process of presentation, the author's techniques – e.g., in epic, the juxtaposition and relationship of speeches, narrative and descriptive ecphrasis. The reader sees – and what do we mean when we say that we 'see' something in a literary narrative? – parallels and correspondences between articulated sections of the whole, formal arrangements such as triadic or chiastic structures, all of them non-verbal phenomena. 'Granted our discussion of these phenomena must be verbal. But we do not derive them immediately from the given string of words, and although we may verbalise our findings, we are rarely able to discover specific concrete evidence in the text for such large-scale inferences.' And in the words of another critic, 'the most significant level where the mind lingers, is not the verbal but the ideational: *the final response is to events imaginatively recreated, not to word-meanings*'.[9] Anyone who considers for a moment what is meant by 'reading' the *Aeneid*, and the effect of the poem when read, will probably admit that what stays in the mind is a sense of the whole, and particularly of how it starts and ends, and of the movements which span these points. Nor is anyone familiar with the poem always able to extrapolate any single reading from the totality of all readings and from a larger, less definite sense of the poem which is more than the sum of all readings.

Any teacher of the *Aeneid* knows how few students nowadays get to the end of it. Yet only when one has done this can a retrospective overview be imposed upon the reading

[8] H. Ruthrof, *The Reader's Construction of Narrative* (London 1981) 40.
[9] S. L. Bethell, *Essays on Literary Criticism and the English Tradition* (London 1969) 45, quoted in Ruthrof, *Reader's Construction* 38.

process, the making of the work. In each several re-reading, the making of the work will be modified by, and will modify, previous readings. How else, if at all, can we grasp it all? There are moments in reading any long work when one has a familiar, all too fleeting sense of having grasped the whole. Such moments may be illusory, but they are a persistent phenomenon which the traditional commentaries seldom account for.

As to the translations, Lattimore's *Iliad* has set a standard which is incomparable, and all extensive quotations are from his version.[10] I have made my own translations of short extracts quoted only in order to isolate some word or phrase relevant to Virgil. The translations from the *Aeneid* are my own. I have preserved the distinction between Virgil's Aeneas and Homer's Aineias; otherwise, I have not thought it necessary to use the Greek spelling of names of Homeric heroes familiar in the *Aeneid*. And though Lattimore prefers Achilleus, Aias, etc., I have taken the liberty of changing some of his spellings in order to achieve uniformity.

[10] *The Iliad*, translated by Richmond Lattimore, copyright 1951 by the University of Chicago.

PROLOGUE: HOMER'S *ILIAD*

Homer's *Iliad* remains a work of peculiar and unique interest because it is the oldest surviving example of a long complete piece of narrative fiction in our literary tradition; and still completely accessible to us after two and a half millennia. It is fascinating to discover that Homer does not, as we might have expected, merely 'tell a story', transmit an account of events; he presents a discourse, a set of codes displayed with (for us) the pride and excitement of novelty as well as (for him) the strength and confidence bestowed by an already rich tradition. The Muses, the descriptive epithets, the whole stylistic apparatus we were once excited to discover to have depended on an oral narrative technique, may now excite us for other and quite different reasons. The oral excitement generated by Parry has worn off, but we are only now beginning to think how to read the text as a piece of narrative.

To take two examples: the phrase 'Priam and the people of Priam of the good ash spear' denotes the entire nation of Troy but is used only in the context of the inevitable doom being prophesied for the city, so that we realise that the good ash spear is in fact not going to be good enough (no more destiny-proof than Wotan's), and that the formulaic phrase operates as a signifier to which readers will respond as to dramatic irony. Again, it has sometimes been said that these adjectives are primarily there for metrical and syntactical convenience, so that (for instance) Achilles is called swift-footed when he is not moving (l.489), 'but that could mark the contrast between his normal state and his present inactivity'.[1] Since most people read the poem in English, the metrical

[1] C. M. Bowra, *Homer* (London 1972) 24.

reason for a particular choice of descriptive phrase is the least interesting thing about it: and in any case, so rich is Homer's repertoire, there are some alternatives which are metrically identical. After reading a few hundred lines, we are aware that Homer is presenting a hero with a number of recurrent and insisted-on qualities and characteristics. The value of the accumulations, choices and repetitions lies in the gradual build-up the reader makes, and not in any individual isolated metrical phoneme.

If reading the *Iliad* poses problems different from those encountered when reading *War and Peace*, can these problems be identified, and if so can they be solved? Or is their uniqueness and their insolubility the essential mystery of the *Iliad* which persists long after the excitement generated by Parry and Wolf has worn off?

> Who was it wrote the *Iliad*? What a laugh!
> Why Homer, all the world knows. Of his life
> Doubtless some facts exist. It's everywhere.
> We have not settled, though, his date of birth.
> Until . . . 'What's this, the Germans say is fact
> That Wolf found out first? It's unpleasant work,
> Their chop and change, unsettling one's belief.
> All the same, while we live, we learn, that's sure.'
> . . . And after Wolf, a dozen of his like
> Proved there was never any Troy at all,
> Neither besiegers nor besieged. Nay, worse,
> No actual Homer, no authentic text,
> No warrant for the fiction I as fact
> Had treasured in my heart and soul so long,
> Ay mark you, and as fact held still, still hold,
> Spite of new knowledge, in my heart of hearts
> And soul of souls, fact's essence freed and fixed.

For Browning,[2] modern in this as in so many of his insights,

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[2] Browning, *Development* (included first in his late collection *Asolando: Facts and Fancies*).

the 'authentic text' of Homer's *Iliad* remained inviolate and unassailable, for it belongs to the reader.

One might posit an innocent or first-time reader of the *Iliad* who had never heard of Zeus or Troy. This seems more likely, though perhaps not much more likely, than a reader of *War and Peace* who had never heard of Napoleon and the retreat from Moscow. Or one might have 'heard of' Troy or Moscow, Zeus or Napoleon, and still not be sure of their place in these particular narratives. Napoleon is as much a character in *War and Peace* as Prince Andrew, and Tolstoi presents him in exactly the same way, as we can see in book x; before the battle for the Shevardino redoubt Napoleon sees the war as a game; afterwards he could not cope with the terrible spectacle of the battlefield of the dead until he could rationalise it as his doing, his will. Napoleon, riding over the battlefield, rationalising the war, is part of the same narrative discourse which has just isolated the wounding of Prince Andrew, presented in Homeric fashion with two epic similes;[3] and beyond all this, the author as the retrospective total consciousness of the historical process offers the reader a remoter perspective in which the great commanders appear as pawns of destiny.

In the *Iliad* the Olympian deities, of which the naive or first-time reader may have heard, are so real to the heroes that they speak to them and see them and even wound them. Yet behind even Zeus's view of the battle, as he sits apart, Homer himself presents a display of events of which Zeus too is only part.

The *Iliad* is the narrative of a siege in which the Achaians (Greeks) are the attackers and ultimate victors, the Trojans the defenders and ultimate losers. But the narrative begins by saying nothing of ultimate victory for the Achaians.

> Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus' son Achilles
> and its devastation, which put pain thousandfold
> upon the Achaians,

[3] 'Like a bird whirring in rapid flight and alighting on the ground, a shell dropped with little noise . . . the smoking shell spun like a top between him and the prostrate adjutant . . .' (*War and Peace* x.xxxvi).