"Pyrrhic Victory?"

_**Aeneid**_ a Roman poem as well as a Homeric epic. Founding of Rome part of its explicit theme (1.11-12), Rome’s future—the past and present of Virgil and his audience—woven into story of Aeneas, e.g., Jupiter’s prophecy in 1. 358-417, war with Carthage foretold in Dido’s curse 4.858-868, Anchises’ panorama of Republican heroes 6.999-1147, Aeneas' tour of the future site of Rome in 8.411-484, the shield of Aeneas with Actium in its center, 8.810-950.

Other interest in early Roman history in first years of Augustan principate: in literature, Livy's _Ab urbe condita_ (From the Founding of the City), begun about the same time as _Aeneid_. Livy's Preface looks to past for relief from ills of present, also for inspiration for Roman renewal; past as escape from and corrective to the present.

What kind of reflection does _Aeneid_ offer on Roman past and present? Natural assumption: poem an indirect panegyric to Augustus. So the late antique commentator Servius: “to imitate Homer and to praise Augustus by means of his ancestors.”

— _Aeneid_ would thus fulfill V.’s promise in _Georgics_, a “great temple” of poetry with Caesar in the middle. One of V.’s two explicit references to “Augustus Caesar” comes near the literal mid-point of the poem, 6.1049.

—Story of war leading to establishment of a new homeland an apt reflection on the civil wars, also an expression of hope for Augustus’ rebuilding.

—Contemporary relevance of Aeneas’ sense of _pietas_, recalling early Roman examples of devotion and suggesting a model for Rome’s new leader.

But for many recent critics this "Augustan" reading seems complicated by other elements of the poem: V’s sympathy for those who are destroyed in the process of Rome’s creation (esp. Dido, to some extent Turnus); the way several of the overtly Roman episodes seem compromised (e.g., Book 6 ending with the catastrophe of Marcellus’ death and Aeneas' departure through gate of false dreams); absence of any feeling of triumph in Aeneas' final victory; the difficulty of feeling sympathy for Aeneas himself. For these critics V. is uncertain or even despairing of Rome's future under Augustus. W. Clausen described _Aeneid_’s view of Roman history as "a long Pyrrhic victory of the human spirit" (_Sourcebook_ 250).

Division between "optimistic" and "pessimistic" readings of poem, terms used since W. R. Johnson's 1976 book _Darkness Visible_. Pessimist (or "anti-Augustan") view widespread in American classical scholarship from 1950s onward, in 1960s and 1970s fueled by opposition to Vietnam War. Origins may lie in differing views of Augustus himself, revulsion at his use by Fascist powers in 1930s, influence of Ronald Syme’s _Roman Revolution_.

"Pessimists" explain ostensibly pro-Augustan sense of poem in various ways: Virgil pretended to praise A., but conveyed a hostile judgment between the lines; or V. sincerely tried to praise A. but found his real sentiments getting the better of him (sometimes called the "two voices" view).

Few critics today willing to be tagged as "optimists" or "pessimists": a growing number subscribe to one form or another of "ambivalent" reading: not the idea that V. couldn't make up his mind, but rather that the poem embodies both positive and negative responses to its subject and places them in continuing tension.

One way of stating the problem: the _Aeneid_ sets forth an ideal for individual and public life that rests on order, control of passions, respect for authority (parental, civic, divine). Ideal is summed up in Anchises' advice to Aeneas in 6.1129-1137. But that ideal is never realized within the poem; control is constantly being lost—often by Aeneas himself—with terrible consequences; only in prophecies do things work out as they should, esp. in Jupiter's prophecy to Venus in 1.358-417, the most optimistic statement in the poem, and—like other predictions of the Roman future—a statement not made in Virgil's own voice.
More specifically: links between Aeneas and Augustus are so clear that a negative view of Aeneas would have to imply strong doubts of renewal under Augustus. Aeneas' most terrible loss of control—after the killing of Pallas in Book 10—is reminiscent of what Suetonius reports about Octavian after Philippi and at the siege of Perusia, ch. 13 and 15 (Sourcebook 69-70).

The gods reflect the problem rather than resolving it: V.'s gods are source both of order (represented mainly by Jupiter) and chaotic passion (Juno); they can act ruthlessly, even cruelly (Juno and Venus against Dido). Virgil opens poem by asking about Juno's anger: "can such resentment hold the mind of gods?" (18)

Implicit answer is "yes."

Aeneas' killing of Turnus (12.1240-1271) a battleground of conflicting interpretations. For the optimist (Augustan) reader, Turnus is the source of disorder, the killer of Pallas; Aeneas must eliminate him and is right to do so. For the pessimist, killing Turnus is an act of fury, a violation of Anchises' precept to "spare the defeated" (6.1137). Both positions tenable, neither wholly adequate. Aeneas hesitates; he experiences a conflict of loyalties, with pietas pulling in opposite directions. Yet although what A. does can be called "just," how he does it—in a maddened rage—deeply troubling. Can order and peace be achieved through violence? Or has Juno's anger simply passed into Aeneas?

Poem does not answer question "was Aeneas right?" But V. may suggest why such conflicts haunt human beings, through Anchises' account in the Underworld of immortal souls imprisoned in perishable bodies (6.956-993). Human beings inherently flawed, divided, subject to tragic contradictions.


*Reading assignment for Lecture XII*: Selections from Propertius, Tibullus, and Ovid's *Amores* in Sourcebook 159-173; start reading Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Books 1-5).

*Further reading on today's topic:*
W. R. Johnson, *Darkness Visible: A Study of Virgil's Aeneid* (Berkeley 1976). Eloquent, passionate (and deeply pessimistic) reading of the poem; the opening chapter (pp. 1-22) is a fine short statement of the "optimist" and "pessimist" positions and the reason each is ultimately incomplete.

N.B. Midterm exam Thursday March 16, covering material assigned through today. A list of primary texts assigned will be posted on the course Web page, along with a selection of images for review.