

The Elusive Vergil

Oliver Lyne

If you open a text of Vergil at the first page, you will find yourself looking at *Eclogue One*, the first of his *Bucolica* or 'Pastorals'. What sort of poem is it? That — and this is my point — is not an easy question to answer. The poem starts, apparently, with Theocritean shepherds: Tityrus and Meliboeus. We seem to be offered a Latin imitation of the Greek pastoral poet, a story of fictional, fanciful shepherds.

Allegorical Eclogues?

Soon however something rather different happens: a political allegory seems to take shape within the pastoral. For when we hear of Meliboeus being forced to leave his *patria* amidst general disruption in the countryside, of Tityrus being exempted by someone he terms a god, when we hear of *Rome* — it seems to be clear that while Vergil is Latinising Theocritus he is *also* referring to contemporary events in Italy, to the policy of land confiscations, and to the political and social problems that this policy caused. And by line 20 or so a contemporary reader would probably feel

fairly clear and confident about what is going on. He is reading an allegory. Meliboeus 'stands for' a dispossessed farmer; Tityrus 'stands for' a farmer who has sought and won reprieve at Rome; the god, subsequently referred to more precisely as a *iuuenis*, is probably Octavian.

In line 18 Meliboeus had posed the interesting and obvious question, *sed tamen iste deus qui sit, da Tityre, nobis?*, 'But that god — i.e. the one who gave you exemption — who is he, Tityrus?' Tityrus' answer then seemed to be side-tracked by memories it aroused of Rome. But then when Meliboeus asks in 26, *et quae tanta fuit Romam tibi causa uidendi?*, 'What was your great reason for seeing Rome?', Tityrus must surely be expected to get back to the point. We expect him to say something like 'To seek out and appeal to the god' — and then get on to the interesting information about who this divine person is and how and why he reprieved him.

But Tityrus doesn't. He gives a completely unexpected reason for his visit to Rome. He, Tityrus, a *slave*, went to Rome to be manumitted. Nothing about exemption, not even in vague terms. Indeed all is specific, and specifically not about exemption from confiscation.

The 'problem' here is of course one that has exercised scholars incessantly. Enormous amounts of energy have been expended in trying to explain the sequence of thought, into giving the 'plot' unity and coherence. It seems to me quite wasted. For what Vergil is doing is *dropping* the suggestion of allegory, re-establishing a story of fictional shepherds. The suggestion of allegory will reassert itself, but the poem is not *consistently* an allegory. It is not consistently anything. It oscillates, teases. It is now allegory, now pure fiction. Vergil refuses to commit it, refuses to commit himself.

The Aeneid

The *Aeneid* too is evasive and ambiguous. It tells the story of the origin of Rome in a way that explores the history and issues of contemporary Rome; Aeneas demonstrates the qualities and dilemmas of the Roman Augustan hero. Clearly to an extent the poem is allegorical. But to what extent? That is an unanswerable question. Vergilian ambiguity is now in fact perfected. Whereas Tityrus was sometimes clearly allegorical, sometimes clearly himself, Aeneas is *always* himself, always with a teasing suggestion of allegory.

In the creation of his other characters Vergil is similarly evasive, non-committal. No characters, or few characters, are simply good or bad, heroic or unheroic. That is perhaps not unexpected in a good dramatic poet, but Vergil can seem almost deliberately teasing. What, for instance, do we make of Ascanius? Some see him as the ideal Roman in boyhood. But is it that simple? An episode in Book 9 troubles me. One might see Ascanius' first feat of arms there as true *virtus*. But is it? Vergil does not, I think, present the episode so unambiguously.



Tityrus on a lamp of the first century AD.



The tearful hero. Ascanius beside the wounded Aeneas, in a Pompeian painting.

The brave Ascanius?

In summary this is what happens: the Trojans are cooped up in their camp during Aeneas' absence. Remulus Numanus, Turnus' brother-in-law, taunts them for effeminacy and cowardice. He boasts of the toughness of the Italians in a speech which develops into a manifesto of hardy Italian virtues. Ascanius cannot endure his boasts. He prays to Jupiter; Jupiter gives a favourable sign. Ascanius shoots an arrow from the wall, transfixes Numanus' head, and delivers a pungent vaunt. The Trojans

are rapturous. Apollo in heaven enthusiastically praises Ascanius — and then he comes down from heaven, adopts a disguise, and advises him to desist from further battle.

There are various disturbing or complicatory factors to be reckoned with when we assess the episode.

First, when we listen to Remulus Numanus' proud speech in praise of the Italians, we must remember that Vergil's Roman readers were Italians, and that what Numanus says — how Spartan and tough they were — would sound true or at least congenial to those readers. Very significantly, Numanus' speech recalls Vergil's own praise of Italy and Italians in *Georgics* 2. —

Next, it may strike us that Ascanius' first feat of arms (a divinely assisted, long-range bowshot) is a little *easy*, even invidious. That is not simply an anachronistic feeling. The ethics of archery were a centuries-old problem. Why, we may ask, did not Vergil give his young hero a *clearly* heroic first action?

Thirdly, while it is true that Apollo the archer god, the Augustan god, praises Ascanius from heaven, it is also true that in his disguise, dressed as the aged companion of Ascanius, Apollo tells him, as I have said, to desist. Apollo seems — perhaps — in two minds.

A fourth point. When Apollo restrains Iulus it is an *ardentem Iulum* that he restrains; and when the Trojan chieftains recognise and respond to Apollo's instruction, it is an *avidum pugnae Ascanium* that they hold back. Ardor and lust for battle may be prime requirements in an epic hero. But the world of the *Aeneid* is not, as one swiftly learns, simply epic and heroic. And lust for battle causes us anxiety on at least one other occasion in the *Aeneid* — when it is displayed by Ascanius' father at the end of the epic.

The ambiguous hero

What are the implications of these points? The first thing to admit is that in killing Numanus, Ascanius destroys a hardy, tough, *Georgics*-like hero. But this seems to be part of the fate of the Trojans in general, to destroy admirable things in their progress towards empire. And I think we can see that Apollo is in two minds about Ascanius, and we can attempt to explain *why*: we can attempt to explain what is governing Apollo's thoughts and actions.

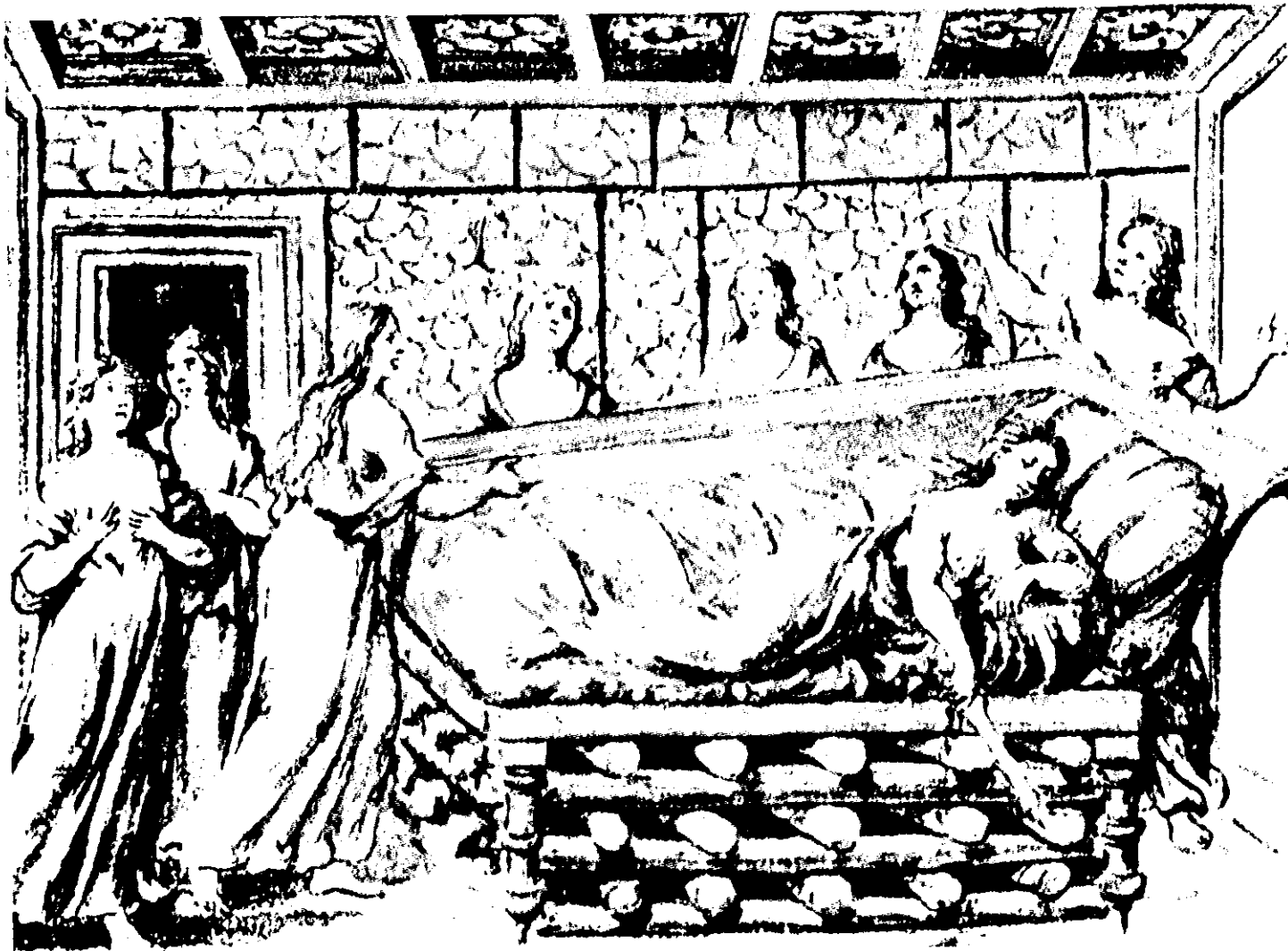
Ascanius in this scene is victorious; and Apollo praises him for being victorious. Apollo knows that a will and capacity to conquer enemies, *debellare superbos* (in Anchises' words), to be victorious, is indispensable to the Roman hero, to the divine line of imperial rulers — and so he praises him. He praises him for precisely this quality: for being victorious. But Ascanius is also *ardentem*, and the *ardentem Iulum* Apollo restrains. Why? Because Apollo also knows that such fiery passions can conflict with the Augustan hero's Stoic and Augustan duty. He knows this, if from nowhere else, from the example of Aeneas. In Book 10, for instance, Aeneas is led into an orgy of pitiless rage and cruelty that conflicts with the Augustan ideal (also enunciated by Anchises) of *parcere subiectis*, clemency. Why? Because of passion, anger, a sense of honour outraged (the young Pallas' honour).

Here Ascanius the son is passionate, angry, his sense of honour outraged. What does he do? He shoots an arrow at long range. This is not so disturbing a response as his father's will be in Book 10. But it is morally questionable, it is worrying, it perhaps does not bode well. So perceiving this worrying passion in Ascanius Apollo deems it wise to restrain him as well as to praise him. And when we see what actions *ardor* and avidity for war do indeed induce in Ascanius' father we can appreciate Apollo's point.

We might be tempted to see Ascanius as the ideal of Roman boyhood, or as displaying true *virtus*. Apollo sees things differently. There is of course much that is heroically, Romanly admirable about Ascanius, but Vergil nevertheless refuses to present us with a *clearly* admirable, unequivocal character. He assigns this strange scene to him, one that seems almost designed to puzzle. Ascanius is and remains an ambiguous, evasive creation.



Cupid dressed as Ascanius with Venus rouse the love of Aeneas for Dido
(fourth-century mosaic now in the Taunton museum).



Dido lights the pyre, a seventeenth-century copy of a fourth century manuscript.

The ambivalent Queen

It is evident that Vergil does not see Ascanius and others of his characters clearly. It is therefore not surprising that some of these characters seem similarly confused and uncertain. They too view other characters unclearly. Consider Dido's view of Aeneas as she is about to kill herself on the pyre (4.651-62). She is dignified and queenly in her hatred now — a vast change from the raving 'woman scorned' of previous speeches. But the hatred is still there. Yet she *kisses* the bed she lies on, a heart-rending and unmistakable gesture of love. Her final sentence encapsulates this ambivalence: *hauriat hunc oculis ignem crudelis ab alto Dardanus*. She wants Aeneas to *see* the flames of her death, to have some knowledge of what he has done, and to carry the ill omen of it along with him. In this there is pathos, and vindictiveness, underlined by a bitter ambiguity.

Consider *hauriat hunc oculis ignem*. The metaphor 'let him drink in with his eyes the fire' refers to Aeneas' *seeing* the flames of the pyre; but it also suits, indeed more naturally suits, an *erotic* metaphor, 'drink in with the eyes the fire of love', i.e. 'feel love'. Dido has a point here, a *double entendre*, and it is a bitter one. We must see her emphasis on *hunc* — 'at least let him drink in *this* fire' — and she means (to paraphrase clumsily) 'if he could not feel love for me, at least let him see the consequences of my love for him, of his lack of love for me (i.e. the flames of my death)'. Pathos? Vindictiveness? Pathos more particularly I think. But see what a melange of feelings there is in this speech: pathos, love, hate, pride, vindictiveness. Dido is as

unable or unwilling to commit herself to a clear feeling about Aeneas, as Vergil is to a clear feeling about any of his characters.

Vergil is evasive and ambiguous. And of course he is also *ethically* evasive and ambiguous. Consider the end of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas' killing of Turnus. In the soul of Aeneas right fights with Right and, I think, the greater Right loses. But the judgement of the poem? Arguably, none. And the result? Silence. The curtain drops. Unlike the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid* does not pursue the consequences of the final duel; unlike the *Iliad* it does not even give us the catharsis of lamentation. And Book 6 of the *Aeneid* presents us with perhaps the greatest enigma of all, an ambiguity over *reality*. If a recent writer's explanation of the gates of false dreams at the close of *Aeneid* 6 is correct, then Vergil is insinuating that the whole world of the *Aeneid* into which Aeneas is re-entering is comparatively speaking unreal, an illusion. If so, what then? What is Troy and all its strife, what is Rome and all its strife *for*? What is all *Vergil's* effort for?

The head begins to spin. The point has been made. Vergil's writing is from first to last teasing, evasive, ambiguous, enigmatic. And why? Because I think, quite obviously, that is the way Vergil saw the world. And if he saw the world that way — as something teasing, ambiguous, ultimately enigmatic — that tells us something about the man.

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