

# A CENTURY OF EXTREMES: DEBUNKING THE MYTH OF HARVARD SCHOOL PESSIMISM

(A reinterpretation of twentieth century criticism of Virgil's *Aeneid*)

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The *Aeneid* can be interpreted in radically different ways. In order to make some sense of the directions of criticism, commentators have tended to impose an artificial structure upon the interpretative landscape. In particular, Walter Johnson has grouped a number of critics together under the term 'Harvard School' in a way which obscures the differences in their interpretations.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, he and others seem to mistake their moderate doubt for an extreme pessimism. The perpetuation of the myth of 'Harvard pessimism' by Stephen Harrison has led to a further misconception in the history of twentieth century Virgilian criticism.<sup>2</sup> This language of opposition has tended to polarise subsequent criticism of the *Aeneid* between two extremes, and to preclude a richer range of readings.

Critics like to be certain about the meaning of Book 6 of the *Aeneid*. It is 'the focal point'<sup>3</sup> of the epic because it both concludes what has gone before and prepares the way for what follows. However, as can be seen from a brief glance at the work of Brooks Otis<sup>4</sup> and Antony Boyle,<sup>5</sup> for example, its meaning is far from clear.

Both Otis and Boyle agree that in Book 6 Aeneas revisits his past in reverse order in the figures of Palinurus (the voyage), Dido (the stay in Carthage), and Deiphobus (Troy). These characters demonstrate the human cost of empire, eliciting the reader's sympathy. However, Otis and Boyle fiercely disagree over the implications of this shared ground, and on two points in particular: [1] Whether Aeneas leaves his old *furor* behind, turning his back upon the past just as it turns its back upon him; and [2] (determined partly by one's answer to the former question) Whether the human cost of empire is justified by the value of empire.

Otis sees Aeneas in Books 7-12 as 'unchanging and foursquare in his *pietas*',<sup>6</sup> whereas in the past, particularly in Book 2, his '*dolor* and *furor*...are repeatedly emphasised'. Thus, Otis answers in the affirmative to the first question and sees Book 6 as 'the death and resurrection piece that converts the defeat, passion, and uncertainty of Books 1-5 into the victorious and unshaken valour of Books 8-12'.

He argues that at the beginning of Book 6, Aeneas is still hesitant in following imperial *pietas* and descends to the Underworld motivated primarily by personal *pietas* for his father. At this point, he is still very much immersed in the past. Thus, he is fascinated by the doors of the temple of Apollo, on which are displayed the labyrinth of Theseus—a symbol of the underworld and his own labyrinthine past.

However, when Dido and Deiphobus turn away from him and the Greek shades flee, he

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1 Johnson (1976), 8-16.

2 Harrison (1990b).

3 Williams (1964), 191.

4 Otis (1964), 281-312.

5 Boyle (1972).

6 Otis (1964), 313.

realises that the ‘past is empty nothing’<sup>7</sup> and he accepts the *fait accompli*. Passing by Tartarus, Aeneas delivers the golden bough, the symbol of life, which, having helped him survive death and the emotional pull of the past, has now fulfilled its purpose.

In the Lethe Valley, Anchises gives Aeneas an explanation of reincarnation. Otis asserts that this is a metaphor for Aeneas’ own death and purification in the Underworld before his imminent rebirth as a truly Roman hero. Anchises then proceeds to describe to Aeneas the pageant of future Romans, outline Rome’s moral purpose, and enlist his *pietas* in the Roman destiny. By the time of Anchises’ question of 6.806f., ‘Do we still hesitate then to enlarge our courage by action?’, Otis claims that ‘Aeneas has been finally brought out of the past, to moral duty and his future. He accepts at the hands of his father and conscience, his now unmistakable personal destiny’.<sup>8</sup> But the pageant ends with the tragedy of Marcellus, not a note of triumph. Otis acknowledges this but argues that the cost is justified by Aeneas’ foundation of Rome in Books 7-12; he establishes Rome according to Anchises’ vision and the principles of *pietas* and *clementia*.

Now ready to face the future, Aeneas leaves the Underworld through the gate of ivory, the way of false dreams. This, Otis explains, suggests that his experience there is not waking reality. The Underworld was certainly reality for Aeneas’ psychological development, but ‘he had, as it were, gone out of ordinary time, out of the factual present, to encounter the past and the future...an encounter [which] demanded a realm of experience beyond experience, a realm cognate with both death and sleep’.<sup>9</sup> Thus, for Otis, Aeneas does turn his back on *furor*, and triumphs in the end because he embodies the new imperial ideology of Anchises and Jupiter.

Boyle, on the other hand, answers in the negative to the two original questions. With regard to the first, he argues that Aeneas does not free himself of his past during Book 6. Although Anchises tells his son of Rome’s future greatness, Aeneas neither rejoices at his father’s prophecies nor replies to his question at 6.806f.; he is all too aware of the suffering involved in the building of empire from his recent encounter with the figures of his past. But in order to carry out the demands of empire, Aeneas is constantly distracted by the Sibyl from contemplating individual suffering and, being the *passive* subject of an indoctrination process (6.889), is made *immemor* to human wastage. As a result, Boyle argues, Aeneas does not alter his past behaviour in Book 2 but continues to act with *furor* throughout Books 7-12, re-enacting the horror of the Trojan War.

Thus, the process of empire-building, represented by Aeneas, does not realise its ideal—i.e. the establishment of an empire through *pietas* and the subjugation of *furor*, as set out by Jupiter in Book 1. This point is highlighted in Book 6 by Aeneas’ re-ascent through the gate of ivory. While Otis held *falsa insomnia* to imply that Aeneas’ experiences in the Underworld were not to be taken as literal truth, Boyle uses an allusion to Homer to show that *falsa* indicates that the ideology of empire is a false hope and will not be actualised.<sup>10</sup> This view is strengthened by the association of the twin gates with the destructive connotations of the serpent imagery, and by the brightness the ivory gate has in common with Pallas’ belt—the spur to Aeneas’ ultimate act of *furor*.

Consequently, Boyle continues, if the ideal of empire is not established, the cost of attempting to realise it is unjustified, as is doubly accentuated by the pictures on the temple at

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7 Otis (1964), 296.

8 Otis (1964), 303.

9 Otis (1964), 304.

10 ‘The dreams that come through the gate of sawn ivory deceive us and bring words that find no fulfilment’, *Odyssey*, 19.563-65.

Cumae and the golden bough. Boyle agrees with Otis that the panels on the temple symbolically represent Aeneas' recent past, but, he argues, they also show his future. There are affinities between Aeneas and Daedalus—both are mature men with sons, exiles in search of a new home, devotees of Apollo, and both feel an emotional response to human suffering. These parallels suggest that Daedalus' failure to sculpt the image of Icarus in an attempt to offset the pain of losing him portends Aeneas's failure to actualise the ideal of empire and thereby compensate for the human wastage involved. Similarly, claims Boyle, Virgil associates the golden bough, which Otis saw as 'life-giving',<sup>11</sup> with darkness imagery, the destructive serpents of Book 2, the death of Misenus, and access to the world of the dead. In doing so, he suggests that, like the parasitic mistletoe to which it is compared, the golden bough, the golden promises of empire, and the golden age of Augustus all feed on the life of others and take their light (*refulsit*, 6.204) from them. The fact that the bough at first resists (*cunctantem*, 6.211) Aeneas' plucking before being overcome further stresses the tragic futility of opposition to empire and its cost.<sup>12</sup>

While the overall interpretations of Otis and Boyle both address the same text, they are thus completely at odds. Otis sees the *Aeneid* as a celebration of the Augustan hero and the hope Augustus brought to Rome, whereas Boyle regards the epic as a condemnation of the costly process of empire and a demonstration of the inevitability of human failure.

With the possibility for such divergent readings, there has been a tendency throughout the twentieth century to label readers of the *Aeneid* as either pro-Augustan or anti-Augustan. Johnson, outlining the history of Virgilian criticism from 1940-1975 in his book *Darkness Visible*,<sup>13</sup> identifies two distinct schools of Virgilian criticism: the optimistic pro-Augustan 'European School', and the pessimistic anti-Augustan 'Harvard School'. Among the former he includes Viktor Pöschl, Friedrich Klinger, and Karl Buchner, who see Aeneas' character as developing from the 'old, primitive code and the mindless, amoral jungle'<sup>14</sup> of the Homeric world into the *humanitas*, *pietas* and *ratio* of the Augustan enlightenment. On the other hand, he creates<sup>15</sup> the term 'Harvard School' to group Robert Brooks, Adam Parry, Wendell Clausen, and Michael Putnam, all of whom studied at Harvard between 1950 and 1970. He characterises them as sensitive to 'Virgil's infatuation with twilight moods, with blurred images, with haunted, half-enacted interviews and confrontations that disintegrate before our eyes just as we begin to perceive them'.<sup>16</sup> They see the *Aeneid's* feeling towards Augustus and his empire as 'considerably darker'<sup>17</sup> than the European School. Moreover, Johnson argues, they believe that 'Virgil offers images and actions that promise completions and harmonies but that seldom deliver them'.<sup>18</sup> While Johnson aligns his own views more closely with the Harvard School than the European School, he expresses concern that the Harvard School wrongly neglect, in his view, Virgil's 'very real admiration for Augustus'.<sup>19</sup>

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11 Otis (1964), 288.

12 Throughout the epic, many characters resist the process of empire, but none are able to overcome it: Dido (*cunctantem*, 4.133), Palinurus (*cunctanti*, 5.856), Turnus (*cunctanti*, 12.919), Vulcan (*cunctantem*, 8.388), and Aeneas himself (*cunctantem*, 12.940) are all forced to conform to the needs of Rome.

13 Johnson (1976), 8-16.

14 Johnson (1976), 9.

15 Clausen himself affirms that Johnson is the first to use the term (*see* Horsfall [1995], 313f.). It is significant to note that the term 'Harvard School' was neither created nor endorsed by any supposed member of such a putative group.

16 Johnson (1976), 12.

17 Johnson (1976), 11.

18 Johnson (1976), 12.

19 Johnson (1976), 15.

Harrison also separates authors into pro- and anti-Augustan groupings. In his article, ‘The *Aeneid* in the Twentieth Century’ (1990), he recognises three trends in modern Virgilian criticism: first, the positive German view (a more narrowly defined version of Johnson’s optimistic European School); second, borrowing Johnson’s terminology, the same pessimistic Harvard School of Brooks, Parry, Clausen, and Putnam; and third, a moderate British and French view holding the middle ground between the Germans and the Americans.

Harrison’s definition of the positive German view, which sees Aeneas as ‘developing through the poem into the ideal Roman hero of Virgil’s age’ and the epic as a ‘sublime assertion of the might of Rome and Augustus’,<sup>20</sup> is similar to Johnson’s European School. However, his use of the borrowed term Harvard School is not so comparable. Whereas Johnson had regarded the Harvard School as ignoring Virgil’s ‘very real admiration for Augustus’ and focusing wholly on his doubts and pessimism, Harrison claims that the Harvard School saw the poem as presenting ‘a pessimistic view *alongside* the surface glory of Aeneas and Rome’<sup>21</sup>. However, at a later point in his article, Harrison abandons his previous usage of the term and reverts to Johnson’s definition of the Harvard School as those who see in the *Aeneid* not the counterbalancing of glory and cost, but a human suffering which ‘overshadows [and] questions the achievements of Aeneas, Rome, and Augustus’.<sup>22</sup>

Clearly, the use of the term Harvard School is inconsistent. If we are to understand why, we shall have to consider in more detail the work of its supposed members—Brooks, Parry, Clausen, and Putnam.

In his article of 1953, Brooks shows that while Aeneas continually follows the ways of Fate and receives information along his journey, this information is limited. After completing each task, he is continually forced on by Destiny to still more knowledge and suffering. This point, claims Brooks, is emphasised by the golden bough. In hoping to travel to the Underworld and return, Aeneas will have to go beyond the bounds of normal human faculties. As a result, one might expect the sign given to him to have a similarly transcendent quality. But the bough, which consists of both inorganic gold and of living tree, embodies rather than transcends the contrasting concepts of life and death in nature. Hence, it gives off not pure light, but a *discolor aura*—‘not the light of revelation, but the dubious and shifting colours of the magical forest’.<sup>23</sup> As a result, Aeneas ‘receives the power [needed to survive Hades], but not the knowledge of what that power should mean’.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Brooks concludes, the ending of the *Aeneid* with the death of Turnus and not the glory of Rome emphasises the point that Aeneas never receives his just reward for the personal cost of doing his duty, particularly for his final violent but necessary act of *pietas*. Virgil, therefore, suggests that the human suffering involved in the process of empire is just as great as the glory of Rome to come. Indeed, while ‘Rome and the ancestor-hero of Rome are brought forth at every turn in the proper attitudes of piety and consummation’, Brooks claims that there simultaneously exists ‘a complex series of incongruities in speech, character and action’ opposed to these ‘axioms of success’.<sup>25</sup>

Parry holds a similar view to Brooks and, in his 1963 article, further develops the latter’s idea of multiple levels of meaning. He conceives of two voices running throughout the *Aeneid*: an explicit public voice (though not necessarily insincere), which declares that Rome

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20 Harrison (1990b), 1.

21 Harrison (1990b), 5 (my emphasis).

22 Harrison (1990b), 10.

23 Brooks (1953), 278.

24 Brooks (1953), 278.

25 Brooks (1953), 263.

was a happy reconciliation of the natural virtues of the local Italians and the Trojans, and celebrates the triumph and greatness of Rome; and a concurrent implicit, but no less forceful, private voice, which mourns for the loss of the pristine purity of Italy, personified by Turnus, and the human wastage involved in the founding of Rome. Like Brooks, Parry carefully stresses the equal emphasis placed by Virgil on these voices. However, unlike Brooks, he twice begins to suggest (regarding 1.203 and 3.496f.) that Aeneas will never realise the ideology of empire—a point whose much stronger pessimistic implications we saw in Boyle’s arguments above but here go unrecognised.

Clausen, on the other hand, does recognise such ramifications, although he does not state them openly. Indeed, running throughout Clausen’s 1965 article is a significant, but not always obvious, tension (as in the *Aeneid* itself!). For the most part, he seems to side with Brooks and Parry in arguing that while ‘Virgil values the Roman achievement’, he ‘remains aware of the inevitable suffering and loss involved’.<sup>26</sup> However, Clausen feels that the labour and anguish of empire is ‘not justified somehow in a final triumph’,<sup>27</sup> and he thinks that Virgil conceives of Roman history as a ‘Pyrrhic victory’—i.e. that the overwhelming cost of eventual success not merely equals but *undermines* the benefit of that victory. This suggests a deeper pessimism which Parry began to articulate but never fully expressed.

To try to explain the wider significance of the final scene, in which the ‘reader is left with no sense of triumph’,<sup>28</sup> Clausen offers an interpretation of Book 6. While up until this point, we may have felt that Clausen didn’t actually intend the deeper pessimism we have just uncovered, his comments on the gate of ivory do clearly suggest a darker reading underlying his argument. Questioning why Aeneas leaves through the gate of ‘false dreams’, he introduces the view of William Everett, who notes that the ancients held dreams before midnight to be false, and those after midnight to be true.<sup>29</sup> Thus, when Virgil sends Aeneas out by the gate of false dreams, he is noting the time—it was not yet midnight. ‘This may in part be true,’ concludes Clausen, ‘but I have a sense, which I cannot quite put into words, that Virgil was not merely telling the time of night.’<sup>30</sup> Implicit in this statement is the view, later explicitly expressed by Boyle, that Aeneas’ vision of Rome in the Underworld is false, in that it will not, and cannot, be made reality.

Putnam, the final critic to have been identified as a member of the Harvard School, puts into words what Clausen could not.<sup>31</sup> He argues that Aeneas acts without *pietas* in Books 7–12, particularly in Book 10 and at the very end of the epic. In the former, the defeated Magus grasps Aeneas’ knees as a *supplex* (10.523) and movingly appeals to him, ‘I beseech you by the shade of your father and the hope of growing Iulus, save this life for a son and for a father...’ (10.524f.). This recalls both Palinurus’ prayer to Aeneas in the Underworld (6.364) and Aeneas’ own plea to the Sibyl, ‘...kindly one, I beseech you, pity son and father’ (6.116f.). But in the heat of battle Aeneas denies Magus’ words the power which he himself had expected to bear on the Sibyl, and instead slaughters him. Similarly, *pious* Aeneas (10.783) fails to respond sympathetically to his own supposed virtue in others. For example, he taunts Lausus for his piety (10.813) and then kills him with *saeuae irae*. At the end of Book 12, Turnus’ appeal offers Aeneas one last opportunity to demonstrate that he has changed since

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26 Clausen (1964), 86.

27 Clausen (1964), 84.

28 Clausen (1964), 85.

29 Everett (1900) bases his claim on Horace, *Satires*, 1.10.33.

30 Clausen (1964), 88.

31 Putnam (1965 and 1981).

Book 2 and to unite *pietas* with *potestas*. Turnus' words do have an effect on Aeneas, but just as he begins to contemplate the possibility of *clementia*, he notices Pallas' belt. The sight of it drives him mad (*furiis accensus et ira / terribilis*, 12.946f.); it is not *pietas* but *ira* that motivates his subsequent slaying of Turnus. Since 'Aeneas' actions could be seen to negate what his mission sets out to affirm', Putnam concludes that 'Aeneas—and through him Augustus—can never fulfil the ideal conditions of empire'.

In a separate paper,<sup>32</sup> Putnam argues that this point is foreshadowed and developed by the sculptures of Daedalus at Cumae. He claims that the last three episodes of Daedalus' story—Pasiphaë and the Minotaur, the story of Ariadne, and the address to Icarus—correspond to the tripartite structure of the *Aeneid*. Just as the Cretan exploits of the first segment demonstrate the deceptiveness of Daedalus' creations (the cow for Pasiphaë and the labyrinth), Books 1-4 involve the trickery of the Trojan horse, the disguise of Venus as a maiden, the replacement of Ascanius with Cupid, and Aeneas' attempt to leave Dido unnoticed. Similarly, while in the second Cretan scene Daedalus undoes his own trickery out of sympathy for Ariadne, Books 5-8 entail the opening of the labyrinthine Underworld and pity felt both by Aeneas for Dido, and for Aeneas by Jupiter, the Sibyl, and the Tiber. And in the same way, Putnam concludes, the failure of Daedalus to sculpt Icarus on account of his overwhelming *dolor* foreshadows Aeneas' failure, as a result of his own *dolor* for Pallas, to spare Turnus and to found Rome according to Anchises' moral code.

It can be seen, then, that there are significant differences in argument within the Harvard School. Brooks sees in the *Aeneid* two *equally* emphasised narratives, one praising Rome, the other revealing the misery involved in its founding. Likewise, Parry posits two *equally* dominant voices—'a public voice of triumph, and a private voice of regret'<sup>33</sup>—running throughout the epic, although he inadvertently suggests the darker view that the 'shores of Italy are forever receding' (3.496). Clausen, too, began by attributing a similar force to both voices, but the general sentiment of his argument and his discussion of the ivory gates suggest an *unequal* emphasis in favour of the private voice. And finally, Putnam more openly develops Clausen's conclusions and argues that Aeneas fails to actualise the visions of Anchises and Jupiter. Thus, as Boyle argues, the cost of empire is not justified by its founding.

Such disparity between the members of the Harvard School accounts for the disparity in meaning between Johnson's and Harrison's use of the term. Johnson's view of the Harvard School as stressing Virgil's private voice takes into account the arguments of Putnam and perhaps Clausen, but it certainly fails to recognise the arguments put forward by Brooks and Parry for a balance between Virgil's public and private personae. Conversely, while Johnson's initial definition of the Harvard School as those who see in the *Aeneid* a counterbalancing of forces acknowledges the views of Brooks and Parry, it ignores the differently weighted arguments of Clausen and Putnam.

However, the common use of the term Harvard School not only fails to account for differences between individual members of the School, but it also fails to position it intelligently within the broader context of Virgilian criticism. Both Johnson and Harrison portray the Harvard School as deeply pessimistic and associate with it all other pessimistic readings. Johnson claims that the Harvard School see the characters of the *Aeneid* as being

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32 Putnam (1987).

33 Parry (1963), 121.

‘devoured by an implacable and unintelligible nihilism’<sup>34</sup> and that their views are grounded in ‘agnostic and atheistic existentialism’.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Harrison depicts the Harvard School as ‘extreme advocates of existential pessimism.’<sup>36</sup> However, clearly neither Brooks, Parry, Clausen, nor Putnam come close to the level of pessimism discussed above in Boyle’s arguments. None argue that Virgil’s private voice obliterates the public, that the epic is in fact a demonstration of the inevitability of human failure, nor, as Parker would claim of the School, that ‘under a mask of political correctness it damns Augustus’.<sup>37</sup> On the contrary, certain members of the Harvard School are in fact more similar to Harrison’s ‘moderate view’ than to any form of pessimism. Indeed, Harrison’s summary of William’s ‘moderate view’ is almost identical to the arguments of Brooks and Parry we saw above.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, the grouping of the different views of Brooks, Parry, Clausen, and Putnam under one ‘school’ for the purposes of simplification in fact complicates matters. It not only creates tension within Johnson and Harrison’s arguments, but by polarising criticism, also inhibits a broader and deeper understanding of the *Aeneid*. Certainly, as we embark on the twenty first century of Virgilian criticism, it is time we forgo such misleading and limiting terms.

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34 Johnson (1976), 11.

35 Johnson (1976), 15.

36 Harrison (1990b), 7.

37 Parker (1996).

38 Cf. Harrison (1990b), 8: ‘Though the *Aeneid* did indeed celebrate as great the victories of Aeneas, Rome, and Augustus, it also expressed a simultaneous sympathy with the suffering of both victor and victims’. Cf. Brooks (1953), 263: ‘Rome and the ancestor-hero of Rome are brought forth at every turn in the proper attitudes of piety and consummation. But opposed to these axioms of success is a complex series of incongruities in speech, character, and action, which are fully as important to the structure of the poem’. And, finally, Cf. Parry (1963), 77: ‘Virgil continually insists on the public glory of the Roman achievement, the establishment of peace and order and civilization...but he insists equally on the terrible price one must pay for this’.

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