
Mrs. Vergil's Horrid Wars

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A COUPLE OF years ago I went to a conference on modern war and its relation to accounts of war in classical literature. Nearly all the other contributions promised to be about the Greeks. In the event, no one else talked about the other half of what constitutes our conception of the classics, Rome and the Romans. That seemed as good a reason as any to turn from Homer and other Greek poets to see if Vergil could speak as directly to us about war as the *Iliad* and the Greeks did. I was no Vergil specialist then and I am not one now. From the beginning, I was inspired by a contemporary poet's take on the *Aeneid*. I discovered that if you let one poet be your guide to another one, you may be led down a path different from any other you could have imagined you would be taking. I will tell you of some of the good I found by going there.



WERE IT NOT for Seamus Heaney I would never have known that the poet of the *Aeneid* had a wife. Apparently she was no cheerleader for her husband's work. This startling news first surfaced in his 1979 poem "An Afterwards," which I heard Heaney read a few years later. I practically memorized this startling poem as I heard it. But my imperfect memory soon morphed "Vergil's wife" into "Mrs. Vergil," and this caused problems years later when I asked one Vergil and Heaney scholar after another about which poem a "Mrs. Vergil" appeared in. Finally Helen Vendler diagnosed what underlay my paraphrase and found the poem I was looking for but had never actually read. Memories of Heaney's read-

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ing itself remain strong. My students and I were much taken by the idea that the poet of the *Aeneid* could have been married. We had read Vergil and Dante together that term and we thought we knew better.

She would plunge all poets in the ninth circle
And fix them, tooth in skull, tonguing for brain.

The poet speaking is locked in a daisy chain of bards damned for their all-consuming ambition to write epic poems. In a literal act of consumption, he must endure the punishment Dante devised for Archbishop Ruggieri and Count Ugolino in the ninth circle, where those who betray others' trust are found. One is mounted on the other, with Ugolino gnawing away on Ruggieri's skull for all eternity. For her part, his outraged widow has distinguished company in this tour of the "makers" or poets in hell.

And when she made her circuit of the ice,
Aided and abetted by Vergil's wife,
I would cry out, "My sweet, who wears the bays
In our green land above, whose is the life

Most dedicated and exemplary?"

Aided and abetted by Vergil's wife, she briskly dismisses this bleating inquiry.

"I have closed my widowed ears
To the sulphurous news of poets and poetry."

Her husband's sin was his total abandonment of his wife and children, all in the service of the presumed masterpiece he spent his life composing. She leaves him in a hell of ambitious, well-intentioned mediocrity.

"You weren't the worst. You aspired to a kind,
Indifferent, faults-on-both-sides tact.

You left us first, and then those books, behind.”

Vergil’s wife and the poet’s widow in “An Afterwards” are the infernal Doppelgänger of Dante and Vergil in the *Inferno*, just as Aeneas and the Sibyl of Cumae once led the poetic way for Dante’s pair. “An Afterwards” reads like a what-if fantasy, as if its speaker had attempted the ultimate challenge of following Dante and Vergil and sacrificed his marriage and family to do so. At the same time, it’s light-hearted about the compromises of writing epic, possibly because that’s one ambition Heaney himself has declined to fiddle with thus far.

Vergil’s wife had some reason to join in on this tour of the ninth circle. Her husband appears to have been locked in his study most of the time, and just look what he came up with. As if singing the *arma virumque* of the first half of the *Aeneid* weren’t draining enough on family life, he opens the second half of the *Aeneid* with “I’ll tell of horrid wars,” *dicam horrida bella*, the story of Aeneas’ war in Italy. Not only that, he promises that it will be a *maius opus*, an even greater work than the first half of his epic poem. Whatever his wife thought, this is an assertion that not all subsequent readers have agreed with. Berlioz found quite enough *opus* in the first half to fill out the five hours of his epic opera *Les Troyens*. And then there is the grandiose subject of war itself. “Terrible wars,” “savage wars,” “frightful wars”: the adjective *horrida* is not easily rendered with a single word, perhaps least of all by its English derivative “horrid.” But we should pause before replacing it with another one. It is exactly the right word to convey what Heaney’s poem is saying about the grandiose declaration about the second half of the *Aeneid* and Vergil’s ambition to create it. The word is not entirely complimentary, and in the *New English Dictionary*, the predecessor of today’s *OED*, “horrid” was noted to be especially frequent as a feminine term of strong aversion.

The root of *horrida* is in the verb *horrere*, “to bristle,” “shudder at,” “shrink in dread from,” and all of those senses are also present. Dryden well knew the etymology and uses “horrid” both in a literal sense in a line in his 1697

translation of the *Aeneid*, “a forest horrid with fern and intricate with thorns” (9.381–82, *silua fuit late dumis atque ilice nigra / horrida*), and then in a less ominous one closer to today’s usage, in his earlier poem, *Astraea Redux*, from 1660: “An horrid Stillness first invades the ear, / And in that silence Wee the Tempest fear”). For his translation of the *Aeneid*, he solved the challenge of translating the difficult phrase *horrida bella*, by not translating it. Instead, he scatters its sense into the rhyme of an heroic couplet.

For I shall sing of battles, blood, and rage,
Which princes and their people did engage.

“Battles, blood, and rage” is a figurative trio, what Dryden defined as an imitation, not a paraphrase or literal translation. Today, Vergil’s English translators work in similar fashion to convey the sense of *horrida bella*, each of them striving for a version that fits its sense as found in both the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* and contemporary English idiom. The English lexicon is vastly larger than the vocabulary of classical Latin, and a translator’s search for the one right word out of many possibilities is always a challenge. Thus, Allen Mandelbaum (1981), “I shall tell of dreadful wars”; Robert Fitzgerald (1983), “For I must tell of wars to chill the blood”; Robert Fagles (2006), “I will tell of horrendous wars, tell of battle lines and princes fired with rage”; Frederick Ahl (2007), “I’ll speak about hideous warfare, I’ll speak of battles, of kings”; Sarah Ruden (2008), “Savage warfare I’ll sing (*sic*), and kings whose courage brought their death.”

Starting with Dryden then no good translator would choose “horrid” to translate Vergil’s *horrida*. Its English derivative today has a less vivid sense than its Latin root, “bristling,” “shaggy,” “rough,” and it’s now applied with a far less ominous tone, to naughty children, like the “Horrid Henry” children’s story books and the Duchess’ advice in *Alice in Wonderland*, to treat a horrid little boy with horrid treatment in return.

Speak roughly to your little boy
And beat him when he sneezes.
He only does it to annoy
Because he knows it teases.

Still, if “horrid” isn’t the right choice to translate Vergil’s word, it is appropriate for the way the *Aeneid* now fares in our present conception of the relevance of ancient poetry to understanding wars, especially when we compare the *Aeneid* to the uses of the *Iliad*.

For a long time, Rome provided the crucial medium through which Hellenic culture could be transmitted to a present age, but since Dryden’s day that’s long ceased to be necessary. Why bother to go to Roman adaptations and transformations of Greek myths and poets when you can turn directly to the Greeks themselves? When the Bush administration was gearing up for the invasion of Iraq it seemed perfectly natural for classicists to turn to Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* for a worldwide protest against it. An *Aeneid* Project sounds implausible by comparison. Why would Jonathan Shay want to write *Aeneas in Iraq* or *Anchises’ Son in America* when he already had *Achilles in Vietnam* and *Odysseus in America* ready and waiting for him in the two Homeric poems? For Shay, their heroes were incomparably more evocative. Aeneas was at Troy and appears in the *Iliad*, but there he’s not the equal of that poem’s hero or of the hero of the *Odyssey*. Shay was also inspired to turn to Homer by attending Gregory Nagy’s lectures at Harvard on the Greek hero.

Even Vergil’s name itself may have something to do with his imbalance in popularity. A century ago “Vergil” was a popular name for male babies, but now, compared to “Homer,” it’s anemic. Today, “Homer” ranks 321st out of 1,220 names by one count, while “Vergil” ranks a measly 3,295th on a similar scale.

Also unlike “Homer,” the name of the poet of the *Aeneid* seems to be forever going in and out of focus, spelled with either an “i” or an “e”—Virgilius or Vergilius, “Virgil” or “Vergil.” Historical linguists suspect that Vergilius-with-an-“e”

may have been the way the poet himself spelled it, but that has yet to be agreed to everywhere. This wavering instability is reflected in two compendious volumes edited by the American Vergilian Michael Putnam, the first published in 2008 with Jan Ziolkowski, entitled *The Virgilian Tradition: The First Fifteen Hundred Years*, and the second, with Joseph Farrell in 2010, *Vergil's "Aeneid" and Its Tradition*. To this day the name of the poet swings both ways, even in the hands of his best critics: Vergil-with-an-"i," Vergil-with-an-"e."

More than Vergil's name appears to have swung both ways. The minute change in vowels may seem of little importance to English-hearing ears, ears whose dislike of front vowels so favored by Latin and its Romance-language offspring is well known to teachers of French, Italian, Spanish—and even of Latin, when it's well-taught. In the United States, the poet's name is pronounced and heard democratically, with no discrimination whatever: with back vowels, gurgles and all, it usually comes out "Vurjull." But the spelling of this name was a matter of significance to those who spoke Latin and they were prepared to read a lot into it.

Two words in particular were much used by Vergil's ancient biographers and other gossips as the root idea embedded in Ver- or Vir-gilius: *virgo*, "maiden," from which "virgin" was derived through the Norman French *virgine*. His Greek nickname, Parthenias, "The Maiden Guy," says the same thing. He is reported to have been extremely shy and modest, and there was a favored slave boy whom he's said to have disguised as "Alexis" in one of the *Eclogues*. (In ancient Roman slavery, it went without saying that any slave, male or female, was at the disposal of their master for any use whatever, starting with sex.) The other word was *virga*, probably descended from the Indo-European **wisgâ*, which has been defined as "rod" or "stick," with much the same meaning in Latin, and with the added nuance that the rod could also signify "a magic wand." Vergil and his magical *virga* appealed to Christians because of the fourth, "Messianic" *Eclogue*, which has a prophetic fervor that reminded

them of the prophet Isaiah's prediction of the coming of the Messiah: wolves would lie down with lambs, leopards with goats, lions with calves and yearlings; and a little child would lead them. Whoever the *puer* of *Eclogue 4* might be remains a perennial question for Vergil's interpreters, but the Christians were not so puzzled. This prophetic turn would really have been something if true, because the *Eclogues* were published more than a generation before the date later biblical scholars found for the birth of Jesus.

All this time, Vergil himself was never known to have had a wife, nor for that matter does he seem to have been much interested in women. A Mrs. Homer sounds more plausible. The novelist Samuel Butler thought the *Odyssey* was so perceptive about femininity that he concluded it was composed by a woman, and he published this idea in a book in 1897 whose title is so long you don't have to read what's between the covers to know its point: *The Authoress of the "Odyssey": Where and When She Wrote, Who She Was, The Use She Made of the "Iliad," and How the Poem Grew Under Her Hands*. All the more reason to be excited by the prospect of a wife for the poet of the *Aeneid*. Now that Vergil's wife has been discovered, it seems a pity to learn she could be so vindictive.

Aside from low marks for his poor family values, another reason for Mrs. Vergil's dislike of her husband may be the way women get treated in the *Aeneid*. Aeneas's mother Venus is a classic example of what an absentee parent can do to a child. He struggles with issues of abandonment from the beginning to the end of the poem, even though she does the best she can to help him on his way. Venus, of course, is immortal and, by definition, gods and goddesses cannot die. An epic body count of female mortal figures is all the more useful, since classical epics require a lot of killing if they are going to be taken seriously. By this reckoning, the *Aeneid* is much harder on its women than its men; it's so compendious on the subject that Vergil seems to have memorized Nicole Loraux's *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman* two millennia before she wrote it. Aeneas tells Dido that he would have killed Helen

when Troy fell but it didn't work out; what happened instead is that he lost his own wife Creusa. She appeared in a shimmering vision to say he should get over her loss and go on to his destiny after Troy. He did save his father Anchises and his son Ascanius. Later, things continue to go just as badly where women are concerned. On the gods' orders, he leaves Dido at Carthage to go on to Italy, and then she kills herself with a sword Aeneas had thoughtfully given her earlier as a present. The poet does add that this wasn't what he had in mind when he gave it to her. In the second half of the poem, he will win the hand of Lavinia and found the Roman race, but aside from her blush and her silence, the young woman who gives her name to the Lavinian shores of Italy remains a virtuous cipher. He reluctantly kills the brave young Lausus and, with no hesitation at all, his despicable father, the war criminal Mezentius. But then there is Camilla, the native Italian Amazon warrior-maiden saved as an infant by her father, who tied her to a spear and threw her across a river to safety; in an ironic reciprocity so characteristic of poetic myth-making, she is finally killed at an incautious moment by an enemy's spear-cast. Camilla is an Italian version of the Amazon queen Penthesilea, whom Achilles killed at Troy; this deed isn't in the *Iliad* but is memorably represented in a famous vase painting in the *Antikensammlungen* in Munich. For once, at least, here is one female not slain by Aeneas himself. But the *Aeneid* remains no place for mortal women, even for older ones. Lavinia's mother Amata fancies the hero Turnus and commits suicide when he's going to lose and she realizes he will never be her son-in-law—or whatever else she had in mind.

By far the most erotically charged lines in the poem are not devoted to women at all, but to the beautiful, impetuous young warrior Euryalus who goes on a killing spree with his companion Nisus. This episode is modeled after book 10 of the *Iliad*, where Odysseus and Diomedes have a high old time scouting out the Trojan lines and killing many of their enemies as they do. Euryalus gets his older friend Nisus to engage in a rampage of eroticism and murder that is closer to

Bonnie and Clyde and Capote's *In Cold Blood* than Homer. He is finally captured and killed with his companion Nisus, and their severed heads are fixed on stakes on the enemy ramparts. The next morning, Euryalus' mother gets to see what's left of him ("Is this what you bring home to me, son?"). To be sure, the great hero Turnus opposing the Trojan invader Aeneas does die. He has to, since he's playing the role of a Hector defending his city from an Achilles—or as Vergil's interpreters also suggest, a latter-day Achilles condignly punished by Hector's comrade Aeneas. Turnus' immortal sister, the nymph Juturna, has the dubious advantage of being able to survive him, forever grieving.

All this adds up to more than collateral damage and should be kept in mind when the attitude of Vergil's wife is examined. She comes to us in a poem charged by a modern poet's feminist imagination. Heaney's Vergilian scene is also filtered through Dante's reading of Statius' *Thebaid*, where the mortally wounded Tydeus seizes the head of the Theban Melanippus and gnaws on it in his rage. Vergil and Dante come upon Count Ugolino feasting on the head of Archbishop Ruggieri for the sins both committed in a civil war in Pisa. Ruggieri had arrested Ugolino and his sons and grandsons, and finally immured them in the Torre della Fame—Italian *fame*, as in "famished," the Tower of Starvation—where the children perished before their father. With shameful indirection, Ugolino ends his story by saying, "Afterwards, fasting did more than grief had done." It is a Dantesque version of the Donner Party, but worse, because it is about a father, his children, and cannibalism. Ruggieri may have tricked Ugolino into his custody, but for Dante, Ugolino's sinful meal is just as great a betrayal.

This grisly, light-hearted poem is not only an inversion of the journey of Dante and Vergil, then, but also an eternal punishment of an ambitious poet who abandons wife and children for his high epic art, a poet still rabid for fame and rivalrous even in death. It is pure comedy, in Dante's sense of *commedia*, a work that ends happily for the blessed souls in salvation, and badly for the sinful. In other poems, Heaney is an accomplished

elegist who has created some of the most beautiful evocations of Vergilian pastoral in contemporary poetry. “An Afterwards” is an example of what his longtime champion and critic Helen Vendler calls his “deliberate choice, to remain on the human, colloquial, everyday level—to remain there for elegies, which normally tend towards apotheosis, and even for love poems, which normally tend towards the idealizing and idealized.”

And it is clear by this point in his career, more than thirty years later, that Heaney has no intention of writing an epic. He doesn't need to. He's been able to encompass everything in the conflicted history of the world in which he grew up, as well as much else. “An Afterwards” is a cosmic joke on epic pretensions, a characteristically witty and telling reflection on contemporary views of the *Aeneid* outside today's classical precincts—especially when compared to the *Iliad*, so long a touchstone for classicists striving to show the relevance of classical literature to contemporary stories of war and peace. For Heaney, born and raised into the era of the Sinn Fein and the Troubles of Northern Ireland, the lovely way Vergil's bucolic poetry effortlessly reflected contemporary Roman political reality in poetry of surpassing beauty was all the Vergilian he needed to be. More recently he has extended his conversation with Vergil to include the *Aeneid* as well, with such poems as “Route 110” in the 2010 collection *The Human Chain*.



Ah, how hard it is to tell
The nature of that wood, savage, dense and harsh—
The very thought of it renews my fear!
It is so bitter death is hardly more so.
But to set forth the good I found
I will recount the other things I saw.

—Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 1
(Hollander trans.)

MRS. VERGIL'S HORRID wars make you wish a writer and thinker like Simone Weil had gotten interested in Vergil and

done as much for him as she did for Homer in her famous essay of 1940, “The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force.” In fact, Weil did write about Vergil, but not in a way that those who love him may welcome.

American readers of Homer in the original or in translation first got to know “The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force” through Mary McCarthy’s 1945 translation. That single essay is one reason among many for Homer’s greater popularity today when it comes to figuring connections between ancient Greek literature and modern war. Weil was a *normalienne*, a graduate of the *École Normale Supérieure*, and of the same generation as Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. She could easily have written in a philological style with lots of footnotes, but this is not a scholarly article and it never pretends to be. As James Holoka says in his recent edition and commentary, “the value of Weil’s essay lies in her distinctive outlook on the human condition, quite apart from the accuracy of its representation of Homer’s actual world view (insofar as it may be captured). It transcends the goals of conventional historical or positivistic literary analysis by affording both a novel interpretation of an ancient masterpiece and an intrinsically valuable moral experience.”

When it comes to Vergil and the Romans, however, this famous champion of the *Iliad* has no tolerance whatever. She spends most of “Reflections on the Origins of Hitlerism” trying to show her readers why they shouldn’t read Vergil or Roman literature at all. Weil’s biographers and commentators know this essay, but oddly, virtually no one else. There hasn’t been a translation of it into English since Richard Rees’s, in 1962. And perhaps this neglect isn’t so odd, so far as Vergilian scholars are concerned. Weil makes it clear early and often that she hates the very idea of Rome and Roman literature; she has her own special place in Hell for the *Aeneid*, a poem she singles out for loathing beyond all others. Her essay could just as well be entitled “Vergil and the Origins of Hitlerism.”

“Reflections” was written after the destruction of Poland and the fall of France, under the same circumstances that in-

spired “The Poem of Force.” It is a polemical essay from start to finish, an indictment of a cultural heritage in Europe that she argues served as the model for the modern nation state and its evil ways. Louis XIV and Mussolini owe as much to the Romans as Hitler, who in fact invoked Rome and its empire in *Mein Kampf* as a model for what Germany could and should do to rise to a new empire under National Socialism. Ever the philhellene, Weil is inspired by an analogy Socrates draws in book 6 of the *Republic* to unmask the ignorance of sophists who profess to know what they do not understand. Because of their ignorance they cannot see the consequences of what they teach, which is why Socrates makes them out as a species of mindless zookeepers nurturing a great, powerful beast without knowing anything at all about its true nature. In this case, the villains are the professors and other teachers who expound a literature and a culture that transmit the virus of Roman imperium to their unknowing pupils, an infection that spread from antiquity to the present.

Imagine the bitter voice at the end of Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est” translated into argumentative prose:

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

Owen’s deliberately banal rhyme of “glory” and “*mori*” trivializes the famous line from Horace’s second Roman Ode about how sweet and fine it is to die for one’s country, suggesting that this kind of Roman cheerleading in the classroom and lecture hall inspired the folly that led Europe to the Great War.

For Weil, it wasn’t just the English or the Germans who were the guilty ones. She argues that this disastrous strain of classical tradition had already reached its full flowering in France, in the reign of increasingly ruthless, expansionary monarchs like Louis XIV and Napoleon, the self-crowned emperor à la Augustus whose Roman image Jacques-Louis David captures in

L'Empereur Napoléon, his Louvre painting of the coronation in 1805. For Weil, the fullest realization of Roman ideals in her own time is to be found in the rise of Hitler and National Socialism in Germany. Unlike her comparatively apolitical, even evangelical essay on the *Iliad*, this direct confrontation with contemporary politics was censored; the Vichy officials appear to have been more sensitive about *lèse-majesté* in French history than about the essay's plentiful insults to France's more recent conqueror, Nazi Germany.

Enough of Weil's argument remains to see why it was impossible for her to think about Vergil and the *Aeneid* without recourse to political history, modern as well as ancient. To her way of thinking, contemporary Germany was not an outgrowth of Nordic myth and German culture, though that was a popular line encouraged by the Nazis themselves. If you look closely at European history, she argues, contemporary Germany with its Hitlerian drive to conquer all of Europe and then the world is a perfect embodiment of the politics and ethics of Augustan Rome, whose greatest poet gave immortal expression to the imperial designs of the later Roman Republic, of Julius Caesar, and of Caesar's adopted son, Octavian, who eventually metamorphosed himself into Augustus.

Myths of universal dominion have consoled many nations, even the humblest; but with the possible exception of the Assyrians, the Romans were the first, so far as we can tell, to develop seriously the idea of a people with such a destiny; it was, indeed, the only original idea they ever had. Its best formulation is to be found in Virgil: "Thou, Roman, bethink thee to rule the peoples imperially." Since one nation is intended by nature for mastery, all who disobey it are rebellious slaves and are to be regarded and treated as such. It is in this sense that one must read the line, "To spare the humbled and to tame in war the proud." We may conclude that this line does really express the policy of Rome, in that a master can be said to be sparing his slaves in so far as he does not inflict on them all the pains that he might; because they possess no rights at all. If they think they do, they are guilty of arrogance. For, it follows from Virgil's formula that there is no third possibility between submission and arrogance.

Weil's history and politics are partisan and she's never dispassionate. Her moral rectitude and radical Christianity made her a saint to T. S. Eliot. To George Steiner, her austere personality and passionate rejection of Jewish identity made her a "schlemiel." Although she had managed to escape from Vichy France, first to the United States, then to Britain, her obsessive moralism led her to adopt a diet no more substantial than what those in occupied France had. This self-imposed starvation contributed to her early death in 1943. Politically, she should have counted as a Free-French partisan closely allied with Charles de Gaulle. De Gaulle himself thought she was crazy (*Mais elle est folle!*).

Weil draws on dissenting voices in Roman and Greek literature to make her point. Polybius and Livy have plenty of accounts of Rome's wars and its seemingly inexorable rise to world domination. She picks up where the heroic Calgacus in Tacitus' *Agricola* leaves off, Calgacus the British enemy of Tacitus' father-in-law Agricola who gives us the famous line, "They make a desert and call it peace." In writing about Rome's wars of conquest, Weil could just as well be describing Nazi foreign policy or the Blitzkrieg.

The Romans conquered the world because they were serious, disciplined, and organized; because their outlook and methods were consistently and continuously maintained; because they were convinced of being a superior race, born to command. And also because they successfully employed the most ruthless, premeditated, calculated, systematic cruelty, combining or alternating it with cold-hearted perfidy and hypocritical propaganda. With unswerving resolution, they always sacrificed everything to considerations of prestige; they were always inflexible in danger and impervious to pity or any human feeling. They knew how to undermine by terror the very souls of their adversaries, or how to lull them with hopes before enslaving them by force of arms; and, finally, they were so skillful in the policy of the big lie that they have imposed it even on posterity, and we still believe it today. Can anyone fail to recognize this character? The Romans knew how to play upon men's feelings. It is the way to become master of the world.

In 1940, this kind of reading was not hard to reach if you happened to be a Jew, even one converted to Christianity, not after *Kristallnacht*, the Nuremberg Laws, and the Blitzkrieg against Poland, the Low Countries, and France.

Most classicists sort themselves out as either Greeks or Romans, in spite of the historical disciplinary unity of the two strains. They end up preferring to go to Greece if they are Hellenists, and to Rome if they are Latinists. This rivalry is in the main genial, with occasional flashes of contempt or pity for those who belong to the other camp. Some transcend these single-minded identities. Weil's antipathy for Rome goes far beyond this kind of disciplinary self-selection.

At the time she wrote, she had some distant company in making this kind of argument, in one of the twentieth century's greatest Roman historians. In *The Roman Revolution* published in 1939, a year before "The Origins of Hitlerism," Ronald Syme came to a critical view of Augustan Rome. The path he followed was different, carefully argued and heavily documented, at once dispassionate and measured. He was a historian of Roman history, not a polemicist attacking it. But his most famous book coincides at some points with the substance if not the tone of Weil's essay, particularly his chapter on the literature of late Republican and early Augustan Rome, "The Organization of Opinion."

As was fitting, the poets favored by the government proceeded to celebrate in verse the ideals of nascent Rome—the land, the soldiers, religion and morality, the heroic past and the glorious present. Not merely propaganda—something much greater was afoot, the deliberate creation of a Roman literature working to stand beside the achievement of Greece, a firm pillar that was to support the civilization of a world empire that was both Roman and Greek.

About Vergil himself, Syme saw a fortuitous convergence of Augustus' enlightened interests and the genius of his greatest poet. So far as a poet from northern Mantua was concerned, Italy had everything to be gained from the triumph of his patron.

Augustus was singularly fortunate in discovering for his epic poet of Italy a man whose verse and sentiments harmonized so easily with his own ideas and policy. Here was his *Tota Italia*, spontaneous and admirable. To Vergil the *Transpadanus*, Actium is the victory of Italy, not of Rome only.

The year 1939 marked the end of Auden's low, dishonest decade, one that had seen the Nuremberg Nazi Party Rallies immortalized by the cinematic genius of Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, the Austrian *Anschluss*, and Chamberlain's capitulation at Munich that erased Czechoslovakia. It isn't hard to read between the lines and see the parallels, if one is so inclined.

Each and every festival was an occasion for sharpening the loyalty of the people and inculcating a suitable lesson. The family policy of the New State was vividly and triumphantly advertised.

Augustus stands revealed as the deliberate founder of monarchy, the conspicuous creator of a system. For himself and for the dynasty he monopolized through every form and sign of allegiance, no proconsul of Rome is ever again honored in the traditional fashion of eastern lands.

Unlike the pacifistic and evangelical "Poem of Force," far distant from the humane instincts that essay seeks to arouse, "Reflections on the Origins of Hitlerism" is expressly polemical, rooted in history and political realities of the day.

Even though Weil was writing at a point when the war was not a year old, what's worth noting about "Reflections on the Origins of Hitlerism" is how much it anticipates later critical debates about the *Aeneid*, debates formed years later in the long aftermath of World War II. Some of the mid-twentieth century's leading Vergilian scholars would then be profoundly aware of the history of their times and come to opposite conclusions about how the *Aeneid* should be read, and what it might mean. Heaney's two wives touring the ninth circle of Hell would not be surprised to learn that Vergil's wars could lead to scholarly wars. To inspire conflict

is one of the reasons poets write epics in the first place.



To tame the proud, the fetter'd slave to free:
These are imperial arts, and worthy thee.

(Dryden trans.)

THESE WORDS of the shade of Anchises to his son Aeneas in the Underworld are some of the most cited and discussed passages in all of classical literature. It's reached the point now that anyone writing about them feels constrained to apologize for adding so much as a leaf or a twig to the scholarly bonfire. Anchises ends his long narrative of future Roman history by recommending that Romans tame the proud (*debellare superbos*) and spare the conquered (*parcere subiectis*). Then at the end of book 12 of the *Aeneid*, in the final scene of the poem, the Trojan Aeneas faces his Italian enemy Turnus who is both things at once, a proud enemy defeated and a helpless suppliant begging for mercy. Like Hector in Homer, wearing Achilles' armor stripped from the body of Patroclus, Turnus wears the sword belt that he stripped from the body of Pallas, the son of Aeneas' ally Evander. He is a visible and audible reminder of Anchises' idealized oppositions of the defeated and the arrogant, and of appeals for clemency and guilt for great cruelty, all embodied in one and the same person, at the same moment.

The contradictory signals are infinite. Given the controversies that have run on from antiquity to the present, a less taxing moral might be that you had better not put too much stock in the advice you get from dead people, especially if the one advising you is your own father. This has long been a scene guaranteed to frustrate those who want to be decisive, to make up their minds about it—and the minds of others.

The German Vergilian Viktor Pöschl saw the killing of Turnus as a necessary price to be paid. Turnus must die so that Rome and Augustus come to be, just as Vergil and Italy

responded to the power of a great leader who would end the generations of civil war and fratricidal conflict once and for all. His 1950 book on the poetry of the *Aeneid*, *Die Dichtkunst Virgils*, quickly became a classic of modern Vergilian criticism.

Italy possesses the noble strength of a nature meant for good and ready to blossom upon contact with a higher idea. Perhaps, then, Herder, Hegel, Mommsen, and others more recent were not entirely right in interpreting the Romans' unique historical success as the result of an instinctive inclination toward power politics. Perhaps there is some truth in the theory that healthy natural strength and a higher ideal are the real bases of true political and historical greatness. Aeneas exists on a higher political plane than does Turnus and represents a more advanced form of armed conflict.

In making this point Pöschl advances a view of the Romans' attitude to basic political values that he had developed in earlier work on Cicero and the historian Sallust. He believed that all moral concepts in Rome, even ones that were originally in the private sphere and the family, ultimately served to affirm the power and the greatness of the state. He argued that the opposition of power and ethical views of power's use and misuse were alien to the Romans' way of thinking. This peculiar view would have been anathema to Simone Weil and impossible for any reader of Greek historians like Herodotus and Thucydides to take seriously, but it allows him to assert that Aeneas is on "a higher political plane" than his enemy Turnus and engages in "a more advanced form of armed conflict." Exactly how killing a defeated and helpless enemy on the battlefield bespeaks an action on a higher political plane and a more advanced form of armed conflict remains to be seen.

In many ways the *Aeneid* seemed to bear out what Pöschl was arguing for. Having landed in Italy as the gods' command had ordered him to do, Aeneas has no choice but to defend himself against the attacks of Turnus and the other Italians who resist the Trojan immigration. This is also the

way the Romans preferred to wage wars: to make it clear that the war they undertook was a just one. The higher ideals of Aeneas and Augustus cancel out any moral guilt for killing Turnus. Pöschl's colleague, Ernst Schmidt, later observed that Germans have tended to see the stability of the state and its integrity as their foremost concern, while Americans are drawn toward arguments based on personal morality and the formation of policy through civil discourse, with their Constitution always in the back of their minds. Schmidt sees this as one explanation for the divergence of views between Americans and Germans.

A few years later, American interpretations of this scene held that by killing Turnus, Aeneas achieves at best a tragic victory, a morally compromised ending of the poem, marked by extreme ambivalence about the values of what Aeneas—and by extension, Augustus—represents. This reading was most compellingly advanced by Michael Putnam, who wrote his first book on the *Aeneid*—one destined to become as much a classic as Pöschl's. When he published *The Poetry of the Aeneid* in 1966, Putnam cited his predecessors, as classicists are expected to, allowing their work to help him define and focus on what was new in his own contribution:

Neither Heinze nor Pöschl, in their search for originality, specifically discussed Virgil's use of language or analyzed, in particular, the power that individual metaphors and patterns of verbal similarity can infuse into a given book or even into the total epic. Indeed, if one major development of recent literary criticism deserves more stress than any other, it is the importance of seeking for unity in dealing with a work of the creative imagination.

The recent development he is speaking of here is the rise of the New Criticism, which was in its heyday in the middle decades of the twentieth century, with its emphasis on close reading of poetry to uncover how a work of literature functions, what its particular art might be. Born a generation apart and schooled in different philosophical and critical traditions, Pöschl and the younger Putnam came to oppos-

ing readings of the same poem. Conflicts in Vergil's poetry translated into a scholarly war, later characterized by bystanders and other latecomers in interestingly misleading ways, even developing into philosophical characterizations and "schools" of thought that neither of them had the remotest intention of founding.

If you believed, as Putnam argued, that by killing Turnus Aeneas achieved at best a tragic victory, an ending of the poem that is morally hazardous and conspicuous by its ambiguity about the ethics of what Aeneas and Augustus represented, you were said to be a "pessimist." If you believed, as Pöschl did, that Turnus' death was necessary and justified, you were said to be an "optimist." This opposition was later criticized for being intellectually and historically inaccurate, if not indeed inane.

But there was much truth in the notion. Optimism is firmly grounded in German philosophy and it is entirely to be expected that Pöschl and his followers at Heidelberg and elsewhere would be optimistic about Aeneas' killing of Turnus. After all, things were really looking up in post-war Germany as well as Augustan Rome. This is precisely the world-view of an important monograph on the subject that Voltaire discovered and published in French, in 1759: *Candide, ou L'Optimisme, Traduit de l'Allemande de M. le Docteur Ralph*. Little is known about the learned Dr. Ralph and his German treatise beyond what Voltaire's title page tells us, but in any case his important work obviously inspired Pöschl and other leading scholars: besides Ernst Schmidt, one could name Michael von Albrecht (the author of an early and highly polemical review of Putnam's book), and especially Antonie Wlosok (perhaps Pöschl's most distinguished student, she would write his obituary for the leading German classical review *Gnomon* and is the author of several enduring works herself). All of them appear to have been of the party of Dr. Pangloss, firmly convinced that Aeneas and Augustus were engaged in introducing Rome and Italy into the best of all possible worlds—at least as of the

year 19 BCE, when Vergil died. You might even say there was a “Heidelberg School” of Vergilian interpretation, and with more justice than what was concocted on the other side of the Atlantic. For some time, Americans talked about “the Harvard school” of Vergil criticism, named after the university where Michael Putnam and other Americans writing about the *Aeneid* had studied or taught. No matter what their association with Harvard, which was in some cases tenuous, various American critics tended to see the killing of Turnus as ushering in the worst of all possible worlds. While none of them seems to have known Weil’s “Reflections,” they were seeing much of what she saw in Vergil’s poem.

More recently, Vergilians have preferred to leave schools to the fish and talk about other things. In his most recent book, however, Putnam has returned to the original scene of the crime, in a series of lectures at the University of Amsterdam devoted entirely to the end of the *Aeneid*. Nor would this be merely retrospective. He ends this publication of 2011 with an entirely new take on Vergil’s poem, by comparing the moral dilemma of Aeneas to the momentary hesitation of Simon Legree in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* before he begins to beat Uncle Tom to death, and Huck Finn’s debate with himself about whether he should turn in the runaway nigger Jim to Miss Watson. Simon Legree gives way quickly to his furies, but *Huckleberry Finn*’s hero is finally led by the better angels of his nature to renounce the preaching of Christian supporters of slavery. He tears up his letter to Miss Watson and resolves to go to Hell for it if he has to.

For Huck, the spirit of gentleness wells up from inside as he pictures Jim and realizes the slave’s dependence upon him. For Aeneas, by contrast, his father’s directive would suggest an impersonal ethical pattern imposed from outside. Should he follow it, he would set a model scheme for Romans to follow. His instinctive feelings for revenge founded on furious, personal anger win out over Turnus’s plea and over whatever tendency toward a moderate response his conqueror’s hesitancy might have harbored.

What Putnam appears to have known from the beginning of his work on Vergil is that poetry is best grasped and taught by working from the world you live and work in; far from resting content in the often hypothetical realm of historical reconstruction, you want to make the poem you expound connect with the world surrounding you. That, after all, is where your students and readers are.

This was more than a vindication of Putnam's interpretations. It also was an ironic turn of events. To begin with, he had carefully studied Pöschl and other predecessors as a point of departure for his own work, just as classicists are supposed to. He found Pöschl's readings a sensitive and illuminating account of the way patterns of imagery worked throughout the poem, and wanted to carry on the conversation. What he did, however, was to move beyond what Pöschl and an earlier German Vergilian, Richard Heinze, had done, to analyze patterns of verbal similarity and show how Vergil worked with subtle variations and repetitions throughout the poem. His ideal reader would and should be sensitive to such nuance. The problem was that Putnam's criticism built on what Pöschl had done, and then led to an interpretation of the *Aeneid* very different from anything Pöschl and his followers could tolerate. Their reaction was prompt and often polemical, both in print and in person. When I arrived at Heidelberg to study the year after *The Poetry of the Aeneid* was published, the first thing I heard about was not Apuleius or Horace or the Heidelberg operetta "The Student Prince," but Michael Putnam's book: "Ganz methodisch falsch," completely wrong methodologically, it was said.

When literary critics attack other scholars' methods they are usually talking about something else. Putnam's interpretation reflects the morality of mid-twentieth century America, with memories of World War II and Korea still vivid in everyday life and politics, even as the American Vietnam War was getting under way. If signposts like Munich in 1938 marked the way for American foreign policy in Southeast

Asia, World War II was equally present in the minds of its academics on the winning and losing sides. European, and particularly German, scholars took to criticizing Americans for allowing the politics and morality of their present world to shape their view of antiquity. But the Germans were themselves children of their own times, and those are times worth re-visiting.



Then thus replied the prophetess divine:
“O goddess-born of great Anchises’ line,
The gates of hell are open night and day;
Smooth the descent, and easy is the way:
But to return, and view the cheerful skies,
In this the task and mighty labor lies”

—The Sybil to Aeneas, *Aeneid* 6
(Dryden trans.)

SOME YEARS after the 1950 publication of his book in Germany, Viktor Pöschl wrote to Gerda Seligson at the University of Michigan and asked her to translate *Die Dichtkunst Virgils* into English. She agreed to undertake the task and her translation was published in 1962 by the University of Michigan Press. This fact becomes significant once you know something of the divergent paths their careers had taken since they had been students together in Berlin in the early 1930s.

In 1933, the year Hitler and the Nazis seized power, Viktor Pöschl joined the *Schutzstaffel*, the so-called “Defense Corps” commonly known as the SS. He would have been twenty-two or three at the time. He had been born in Graz, in Austria, and earned his doctorate at the University of Heidelberg, and then acquired German citizenship. Himmler insisted that new recruits should be twenty-five or under, and in this respect Pöschl was typical. Also typical because the SS attracted many members from the upper-middle classes and the aristocracy, particularly the well-educated. Himmler’s

aim was to out-class the more numerous and more plebeian Brown Shirts of the paramilitary SA (*Sturmabteilung*), Ernst Röhm's Storm Troopers. The number of lawyers and doctors recruited was seven times their percentage in the general population, the average income of even noncommissioned members was twice that of the average civilian's income. What is particularly worth knowing is that by 1937 academic professionals made up over ten percent of the total membership of the SS. In Nazi Germany, joining the SS was definitely a way to get ahead in your career, not least in classical philology. Much has been said about this story. It's part of the reason why German refugee artists, writers, poets, playwrights, composers, and many others of Germany's most talented people suddenly appeared in England, the United States, Canada, and elsewhere, enriching their new countries, everywhere transforming the universities and professions they came to.

Historians of the Nazi era have found little archival evidence for Pöschl's career before and during the war; however much there was of it, it was mostly destroyed in the intensive bombing of Germany. From what little is known, he was an interpreter and translator, officially oversaw education in schools; he did serve in occupied areas, but apparently never on a battlefield. He was an accomplished linguist and spoke a number of languages besides English, French, and German. After the war, he was exonerated in the de-Nazification process, both by former colleagues and classicists writing from abroad, and was then able to go to Heidelberg in 1950 as a Professor Ordinarius, where he taught until his retirement in 1976, and worked until his death in 1997. In the course of a long and distinguished career, he gave the Sather Lectures at Berkeley, the highest international honor a classicist can receive. In her long obituary for Pöschl in *Gnomon*, Antonie Wlosok sought to minimize Pöschl's membership in the SS by arguing that it was mainly a matter of youthful opportunism, and that in its earliest days the SS was not synonymous with the worst crimes of the Nazi regime, which

began in earnest only with the war's beginning in 1939.

Possibly so. As said, many public records were lost in the war and we can probably never know for sure. It is all the more important then to remember that, for whatever reason they joined, every member of the SS had to swear a personal oath to Hitler as a condition of membership; this guaranteed their complicity with the regime. It was a variation of the oath German soldiers had sworn to the Kaiser in earlier generations, updated for the Führer of National Socialism:

We pledge to you, Adolf Hitler, loyalty and bravery. We swear obedience to you and the superiors appointed by you, even unto death, as God is our witness.

This pledge to be loyal to the death became reality for many members of the SS in the later years of the war, particularly the Waffen-SS, the armed wing whose fanatical loyalty helped prolong the war by some months in its later stages. The SS was also heavily involved in the administration and operation of the extermination camps following the Wannsee Conference in early 1942. As for the SS in its early years, Robert Lewis Koehl notes in his book on the structure and power struggles of the SS, that if the killing of the Jews of Germany and Europe did not become an explicit goal of the SS leadership until the war years, the destruction of Jewish communities and their members had nonetheless been a money-making operation from its inception in Germany in 1933. That went on everywhere in the Reich, before there were any fronts. From the moment it was founded, the SS was never benign.

The reason for making this all-too-familiar journey through the twentieth century's Avernus (which Dryden translates as "gates of hell") is what it meant for Pöschl's book to appear in English. It says much about the crucial role translation plays in teaching classics and classical scholarship, but even more about the character of the scholar and teacher who did it for him. Thanks to Gerda Seligson's translation, *The Art of Vergil* became widely available to

teachers at every level in secondary and higher education, and ultimately was read and taught far beyond the classical precincts of the United States, in the very country Nazi Germany had declared war on just days after Pearl Harbor.

Gerda Seligson was born into a Jewish family in Germany in 1909, one year before Pöschl. She started life as a German citizen; as Deborah Pennell Ross reports in the obituary she wrote for the University of Michigan, “she was trained in the strictest and most thorough tradition of classical philology and German student life.” In the classic manner of German students, she had her *Wanderjahre*, studying at Kiel, Heidelberg, Göttingen, and Berlin. Her teachers included some of the greatest names of nineteenth- and twentieth-century classics, such as Eduard Norden and Werner Jaeger. But soon after completing her thesis on Plato’s *Laws* and passing the *Staatsexamen* in 1933, she had to leave Germany because, as a Jew, she was blocked from any kind of academic employment in the Reich. She had been a fellow student with Pöschl in Berlin, and eventually came to the University of Michigan in 1956, where she embarked on a vigorous career in teaching elementary Latin with Waldo Sweet. Towards the end of her tenure, she wrote an elementary textbook entitled *Greek for Reading*, a companion to *Latin for Reading* that she had earlier co-authored with Glenn Knudsvig. She taught Greek throughout the early 1990s and continued to read it critically with students and colleagues until a few months before her death. She was a person of remarkable dedication and integrity, by every account I’ve heard of her.

All this needs to be kept in mind to appreciate the generosity of Seligson’s agreeing to translate Pöschl’s book into English. We never met, but when I wrote to her about him in the late 1980s she wrote back promptly and said that, Yes, she and Pöschl had been students together in Berlin and that she had always regarded him as a bit of a dreamer and an idealist whose dedication to poetry and art and music was the best thing about him. She didn’t have so high a regard for his political acumen or common sense.

This is as far as my knowledge of Pöschl's translator goes. Having dedicated much of her life to the teaching of Latin and the study of Roman history and literature, she would probably have been able to tell Simone Weil a thing or two about Germans and Romans. Imagine what an encounter between Seligson and quarreling Vergilians might be if it appeared in the kind of sequel so popular in Hollywood today—say, “An Afterwards—*Parte Deux*.” Would she join Simone Weil in plunging all the Vergilians into the ninth circle and fix them, tooth in skull, tonguing for brain? (Probably not; too violent.) For all their scholarly backbiting in life, would she make hell a rabid egotistical daisy-chain? (Certainly not; too prurient.) To each American or German scholarly ego, unyielding, spurred, ambitious, unblunted, lockjawed, mantrapped, each a fastened badger jockeying for position, hasped and mounted, would she just say, along with the poet's visiting wife, “I have closed my ears to the sulphurous news of you critics and your careers. Why could you not have, oftener, in our years above, come down laughing from your carrels and studies and walked the twilight with me and my students, like that one evening of elder bloom and hay when the wild roses were fading?” Possibly so. Heaney's poem makes one wonder if poets are the only suspect party in the infernal sweepstakes of “An Afterwards.” Might their critics and commentators be as well?



“*Pöschl war in der SS.*” His early career was well known locally when I went to Heidelberg to study with him in 1967, but in those days the consciousness of the world and Germany was not nearly so developed or informed about the Holocaust as it would come to be. At that point, the generation of German students I knew acknowledged their country's history, but their attention was much more focused on the American War in Vietnam. With the Tet Offensive the following winter, Lyndon Johnson's withdrawal from presi-

dential candidacy, and the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, everyone had much to deal with in the tumultuous events of the moment. This time also marked the beginning of student protests and riots in Heidelberg and other German universities, as students began to demand reform of their archaic university system. The intense controversy in Germany occasioned by the publication of Daniel Goldhagen's 1995 book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, lay twenty-five years in the future.

Eventually, the time came when classicists realized this modern story was as much their concern as anyone else's. In his 2002 book *Von Athen bis Auschwitz* (English translation 2005, *From Athens to Auschwitz*), the Roman historian Christian Meier addressed the problem of "coming to terms with the past," which in German is expressed by what Meier himself regarded as "a rather clumsy term." (And it is true that *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* does seem to come straight out of Mark Twain's "The Awful German Language," still beloved by graduate students who have to learn German, even though it has long since ceased to be the leading international idiom for classicists.)

Meier argued that the process of fully realizing the meaning of the Holocaust entailed a long process.

The problem was threefold: (1) for people to become aware of the Holocaust and (2) to realize the dimensions of the extermination of the Jews . . . It was absolutely essential that we grasp the monstrosity of what had been done. And finally, (3) it was necessary to register how many people actually participated in the extermination process, either directly or indirectly.

National memorials in the United States (opening in 1993 in Washington, DC) and Germany (Berlin, in 2004) give some idea of how slowly fuller public awareness of the Holocaust evolved. Part of Meier's aim in his title *From Athens to Auschwitz* was to shock his readers to attention by linking two places that no one would have imagined could be uttered in

the same breath. They seemed to be spiritually and historically antithetical, but for historians like Meier and the American Suzanne Marchand, in *Down from Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750–1970*, there were many connections between German classicism and German political life. These connections needed to be confronted.



I TAKE NO pleasure in rehearsing what little I know about these early years in Pöschl's career, but it is necessary if we are interested in the realities of the worlds in which each of us lives and works, and in how those worlds affect the study of Vergil and classics generally.

Pöschl was as accomplished a teacher as he was a scholar and literary critic. He was capable of reaching a wide audience and did so in the manner of many German professors who considered it part of their duty to do so. At the same time, he could lead students training to be university or school teachers with the kind of attention to minute and patient learning that Americans in a hurry often never see. I took an *Oberseminar* he conducted in which the entire Winter Semester was devoted to the minute analysis of five odes of Horace, each of them exhaustively researched and commented on by 34 students, who all wrote papers and gave reports, followed by still more commentary from other students assigned to critique each other's work. Sessions were often more like the Roman arena than a sedate academic classroom. After a hapless student I knew finished reading an evidently uninspired paper, Pöschl asked, "Did you really pass the *Abitur*?"—the cumulative examination that qualifies secondary school students to go on to university. Along with two other students, I myself was assigned twelve lines from Horace's ode to the goddess Fortuna of Antium (modern Anzio), and had roughly four months to learn everything I could about them. Afterwards, I found most interpretations of Horace's odes cursory and in need of further detailed work. A few years later, when I was visiting Heidelberg, I re-

searched and wrote an article on another ode of Horace, following as well as I could the same approach I had learned. It now reads to me like a parody of Germanic scholarship—"a useful garland of quotations," as a famous English colleague elegantly put it. By that time, Pöschl had gathered the poems we had dissected and a few others into a book on Horatian lyric poetry (*Horazische Lyrik: Interpretationen*), which he dedicated *meinen Schülern*, "To my pupils."

Viktor Pöschl's lectures were justly famous: eloquent and fluent in English and many other languages, his public performances in Heidelberg had a certain grandezza about them that no other professor's seemed to have—at least to my half-tutored ears. American classicists who did their PhD with him, like Gregory Carlson, acquired more than a little of their mentor's eloquence, as I realized when I heard Carlson give a lecture on the *Aeneid*. Pöschl's course on Roman love elegy was delivered in one of the largest lecture halls of the university. When the professor entered the students would rap on their desks, a traditional way German students applaud before or after speakers. One day, I happened to sit down at a desk where some anonymous predecessor had inked in some indelible verses.

Alles schläft und einer spricht:
Dieses nennt man Unterricht.

All asleep and one is speaking:
This is what they now call teaching.

This graffito was true enough for some other lectures I heard, but not Pöschl's. He commanded a wide knowledge of German and European literature and philosophical thought, and displayed a well-developed talent for moving across the boundaries that German academic professionalism then tended to enforce strictly, even more strictly than the Americans' version of it. His lectures like much of his best criticism were the least narrowly conceived of any German professor's I heard, there or elsewhere. In that course on Roman love elegy, to illustrate one

of the most characteristic tropes of the hopeless lover who has to carve his mistress's name into the bark of forest trees, he suggested we think of it as the motif of "Ich schnitt es gern in alle Rinden ein" ("I'll carve it gladly into every tree's bark I see"), the first line of Wilhelm Müller's poem "Ungeduld" ("Impatience"), now best known to non-German speakers through Schubert's setting of it. As he went on to explain, Müller's poem is itself a playful allusion to Orlando in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, in which the distracted lover carves his beloved Rosalind's name into the bark of every tree he comes across in the Forest of Arden. The move from Schubert to Müller to Shakespeare and back to Propertius and Tibullus was characteristic of the way Pöschl could write, and teach.

There was also a depth to his knowledge of music that went well beyond what one heard in the lecture hall. Like Michael Putnam, Pöschl was an accomplished classical pianist. I think this musical side of both of them must have had much to do with the exceptional sensitivity both show in their reading of Latin poetry. For them, the language and poetry of Vergil are not just a printed text on the page, but something akin to the notes in a musical score. Also like Pöschl, Putnam is an exceptional teacher, as his many students from Brown I've met over the years attest.

Pöschl may have switched to German citizenship for reasons of convenience, but his Austrian hospitality to students was well known. He had manageable groups of us from the seminar over to his home toward the end of the semester for an evening of food, wine, and music. There were not only phonograph records to listen to, like the Tchaikovsky violin concerto with its endless first movement—"dieser endlose Satz," as Pöschl groaned at one point—we were also invited to play his grand piano, either four-hands or solo. Scores were available for almost any classical piece one could name. To signal the end of the evening, Pöschl himself sat down and played from memory the D-flat Mazurka of Chopin (Op. 30, No. 3). It made for a bitter-sweet conclu-

sion. The mazurka opens with a vigorous forte in the major key, immediately followed by the same notes pianissimo and slower, in a minor key. The mazurka ends with a D-flat major chord, as if to defy the melancholy of this constant downward pull to the minor chord. It was as if we were being reminded that one must always recall sad moments even in the midst of happy ones.



I can't forget about the past, but I also know that the past is largely gone. Of what dregs remain, people must cleanse themselves in their own way.

—Martin Ostwald

MANY MILLIONS of others in the now almost-vanished generation of Viktor Pöschl and Gerda Seligson suffered enormously, not least the refugees who were able to escape Germany and went on to contribute so much to the education of students in their adopted countries. I studied with one other German professor whose own life story provides as instructive a contrast to Pöschl's as Gerda Seligson's.

The Swarthmore professor Martin Ostwald followed a path similar to the one that led Gerda Seligson to America. In my one class with him, he proved to be every bit as effective a teacher as Pöschl, with a style he had developed for an academic world significantly different from the culture of obedience to be found in German universities in the years I saw. He was a rigorous philologist but had a relaxed, conversational manner that could put even the most neurotic student at ease. He earned degrees at Toronto, Chicago, and Columbia, and taught at Wesleyan, Columbia, and finally Swarthmore and the University of Pennsylvania, where he became a distinguished historian of Greek intellectual and political history.

Why is it that so many of the teachers we find to be the best managed to teach us so much, even when we wouldn't or couldn't become disciples in their fields? Perhaps it's part

of the American melting pot, or something less digestible, the general courses in liberal arts that make study in American universities and colleges sometimes seem so much looser, less concentrated than the highly focused university curriculum in Europe. Whatever the reason, some life-long friends I made in Ostwald's seminar in pre-Socratic political philosophy agree with me that our one seminar with Martin offered us some of the best teaching we ever encountered in any subject taught by anyone, anywhere. As it happened, none of us went on to become specialists in the subject he taught, but we got to see in action something equally important: a Platonic form of the kind of teacher we wanted to try to be. As he explained in an interview for the *Swarthmore College Bulletin*, Ostwald knew how crucial teaching was for making the classics live. The worse the life experience, the more clearly one comes to see this.

My personal experiences show me how human beings are capable not only of degrading and dehumanizing themselves and their fellow men but also that people have the potential to achieve greatness by creating monuments in art, literature, philosophy, and social justice that constitute the values of civilized life. In my case, the Greeks have shown the way, and it is their heritage that I have tried to pass on to my students.

Ostwald came over to Princeton from Swarthmore once a week for our seminar, and he had as many levels of Greek to deal with as there were students. He later told friends of mine who had studied with him at Penn that at that early point in graduate school I myself was "in diapers." (Too generous. I would say, "embryonic.") His classroom manner was in much the same key, at once gentle and sardonic. He required us to circulate copies of our weekly papers to other members of the seminar ahead of time—and this, in a pre-Xerox and pre-internet era when carbon paper or the mimeograph were our only clumsy weapons of choice. His advice to all of us about what we should write was simple, and in Greek: λέγε τι, "Say something." Extensive reports of

earlier scholarship were neither required nor much welcomed. He wanted us to think about the Greek we were reading rather than about the scholars who had written on it. He had silken, murmuring advice for those struggling to keep up with the substantial assignments, suggesting we read “with an occasional glance to the left”—that is, to the left page in Greek in the Loeb edition, facing the English translation on the opposite page.

Throughout the seminar, Ostwald made no reference to his early life in Germany. The first I ever heard of it was some years later, when a famous German Hellenist, Wolfgang Schadewaldt, addressed a plenary session of the American Philological Association meeting in Toronto. Martin was sitting towards the back of a large room filled with people, and as the lecture was about to get under way, he said aloud in a distinctly audible way, “You know, he’s a Nazi.” He then sat there throughout the lecture puffing away on his pipe, glaring at Schadewaldt, and afterwards happily explained to anyone who asked what he had meant and why he had said it.

Along with the Latinist Eduard Fraenkel, Schadewaldt had studied in Berlin with Nietzsche’s foe, the famous Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf; both of them were friends and colleagues at the University of Freiburg when the Nazis seized control of the state and its academic institutions in 1933.

Schadewaldt was an early and enthusiastic collaborator with the regime’s academic policies, and he went much further down this road than anything we know of in Pöschl’s career. He was a close associate of Martin Heidegger, who became the Rector and then the new, Nazi-inflected *Führer* of the university. Schadewaldt himself was a figure of considerable prominence in the new regime and instrumental in forcing his Jewish friend and colleague Eduard Fraenkel to leave Germany in 1933. Fraenkel went to Oxford, where he became one of the most prominent and revered members of the university’s classics faculty.

Ostwald denounced Schadewaldt for all these reasons, but he had personal ones as well. Born in 1922, he would have

been too young to be involved in that early struggle of Fraenkel and others in the universities. His father was a lawyer and had studied classics in school, and saw that Martin and his brother received the same education. Martin himself was preparing to become a rabbi. But when he was seventeen, there came the night of November 10, 1938, when a cohort of SS officers broke into his family's home and wrecked the place. This was *Kristallnacht*. The next morning his father called the police to report it, but when they arrived they saw nothing wrong; instead they arrested Martin, his father, and his brother, and took them off to police headquarters. Shortly thereafter, all three were marched to a railway station and transported to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp near Berlin. A few weeks later the boys were released and, as Ostwald reported in an interview for the *Swarthmore College Bulletin*,

My father is the one to whom I owe my love of classics. He knew Greek fairly well, and he quoted Homer to us: "The day will surely come when holy Troy will perish, and Priam and Priam's people." He wanted to comfort us, to tell us this kind of Germany wouldn't last. It didn't, but he didn't either.

Some ten weeks later, possibly through his mother's efforts to get him and his brother on a *Kindertransport* out of Germany, the two boys were able to go to England where his brother stayed, and Martin eventually began the long journey that would take him to Canada and the United States. They never saw their father and mother again. They learned after the war that their father had died in the Theresienstadt concentration camp in 1943; their mother was sent to Auschwitz in 1944 and that was the last he and his brother knew of her.



IT SEEMS reasonably clear that people who think and write about poetry and wars ancient and modern need all the help they can get. Until the Tower of Babel is dismantled stone by

stone and history reverses itself, they will also need poetry's translators and interpreters as well. Since critics and scholars are forever telling us what poems to read and how to read them, it is important to listen also to the voices of those who know poetry better than anyone else, simply because they make it. In his lecture "The Government of the Tongue," Seamus Heaney writes about what he terms "the great paradox of poetry and imaginative arts in general."

Faced with the brutality of the historical onslaught, they are practically useless. Yet they verify our singularity, they strike and stake out the ore of self which lies at the base of every individuated life. In one sense, the efficacy of poetry is nil—no lyric has ever stopped a tank. In another sense, it is unlimited. It is like the writing in the sand in the face of which accusers and accused are left speechless and renewed.

"The writing in the sand" that Heaney alludes to comes from chapters 7 and 8 in the Gospel of John, the story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery. The scribes and Pharisees bring her before Jesus and ask him what his verdict would be. Should she be stoned as the Law of Moses commands? They are testing him, and he makes no reply but bends down and starts writing with his finger in the sand. They keep at it until he stands up and says, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone." They all eventually leave, one by one, and Jesus is left alone with the woman. He looks up and says to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again." The way Heaney comments on this passage is itself a parable about the difference between the way we critics and scholars go about posing and answering such questions, and the poet's way.

In the Anchor Bible commentary on this passage from the Gospel of John, Raymond Brown performs the familiar task of trying to answer a question that interpreters and critics would typically pose. The text doesn't say what Jesus was writing. So what was Jesus drawing in the sand with his finger? There

have been many answers, and Brown gives a sample.

Roman legal practice was for a judge to write a sentence before he delivered it, so Jesus wrote down what he would say, and then he said it. Or perhaps he was simply tracing lines in the sand because he was thinking, or because he wanted to show his imperturbability, or to contain his feelings of disgust at the violent zeal of the woman's accusers.

Brown is a careful commentator and he doesn't buy any of these answers.

There is simply not enough evidence to support any of these surmises; and one cannot help but feel that if the matter were of major importance, the content of the writing would have been reported.

The difference between a commentator and a poet isn't really what the answer is to this question. It is whether a poet would be inclined to ask such a question in the first place. Heaney thinks she would not.

The drawing of those characters is like poetry, a break with the usual life but not an absconding from it. Poetry, like the writing, is arbitrary and marks time in every possible sense of that phrase. It does not say to the accusing crowd or to the helpless accused, "Now a solution will take place," it does not propose to be instrumental or effective. Instead, in the rift between what is going to happen and whatever we would wish to happen, poetry holds attention for a space, functions not as distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves.

This essay is not only an important revelation of Heaney's poetics, it also illuminates what happens in reading a poem that is as deeply charged with law and its transgression as the ending of the *Aeneid*.

The scholarly wars over Vergil's war are a necessary fact of life for teachers and commentators, and they have no end to them, any more than the commentaries on Jesus' writing

in the sand. Both biblical text and poem at once invite interpretation and are never quite captured by it, no matter how brilliant the commentator may be. Poetry, Heaney argues, “must not submit to the intellect’s eagerness to foreclose. It must wait for a music to occur, an image to discover itself.”



THE STORY of Mrs. Vergil and her horrid wars doesn’t end with any generation. When it comes to war, scholars and teachers are by the very nature of their disciplines like generals, mostly condemned by what they do to fight the last one—in the case of classicists, their scholarly wars. There are exceptions. There can be activists, as there have been from the beginning of the last century through Vietnam to the wars of today. This is why it’s not just the scholars of antiquity who will find the next ancient war of their calling, but the poets and artists and translators who will lead the way. As this story suggests, they are a crucial part of whatever classics in the next generation can do.

In 2007, Olivier Kemeid wrote a play called *The Aeneid, Inspired by Vergil*. He found equal inspiration in the great French Latinist Jacques Perret’s translation for the Budé edition of the poem—like Ostwald’s Loeb, a translation with the facing text of the original. He began work on it at the Quebec Arts Council and the Center for Playwrights in Montreal. Judith Miller completed a translation of it from French to English in 2008 and this was given a bench reading in New York in 2012, with music by Duncan Sheik. A full production is promised at some point in the future.

At every stage in their initial conception and evolution, first as a dramatic script, and then as a performance led to revisions and still more performances, it is the work of translators like Jacques Perret and Judith Miller who make it possible for the playwrights and directors and actors and composers and musicians and stage and lighting designers to make these an-

cient wars our wars, and their mythological and ancient characters, our characters, and us, their audiences.

Like every good poet and playwright working with a classic text, Kemeid can be what Horace called a *fidus interpres*, your scrupulously accurate translator, as when for example he brings to life the shadowy figure of Aeneas' wife Creusa at the fall of Troy, when she appears to Aeneas.

Don't fall*
You don't have time to bury me and besides it will serve no purpose
It was said that I was not meant to leave our city I am tied to this shore
We can't do anything about it
Don't fall
You'll find someone else in another country in another land
Don't fall
It's I who won't see our son grow up
It's I who won't take the long road to exile
Don't fall
If I hadn't handed over our son you'd be alone
You must go on he needs you
Watch over him I will watch over you from the realm of the dead
I love you Aeneas I love you and I wait for you.

But then in the very next scene Kemeid pulls the *Aeneid*, and us, into the present-day reality of global tourism, where the refugees from Troy come ashore, not at Dido's Carthage, but a resort island. Perhaps it is a Club Méditerranée somewhere, anywhere. Here are two upwardly mobile professionals on vacation, Robert and Lucy.

Robert You know what I'm thinking we should do this more often
Lucy (reading a book, sipping a drink) Mmmmmmmmmmm
Robert Take a vacation
Is this great or what I mean stop for two minutes look at the horizon the blue sea look at the sun isn't this great isn't it
And we deserve it do we deserve it boy do we deserve it

*In the original French, Kemeid does not punctuate, so neither does his translator.

We worked and sweated hard enough to be here I can tell you I
have no guilt
But you have to take advantage of these moments know how rare
they are
Maybe that's why they're special
Lucy Mmmmmmmmmmm
Robert What's hard isn't money people think that money is what's
hard but money is nothing I mean you know what I mean money
when you have the minimum well sure there are those people
who don't have any at all and that's terrible of course I don't
mean
But let's take those who have just a little bit
Lucy Mmmmmmmmmmm

Then refugees spoil their vacation.

*Suddenly there appear a number of emaciated figures crawling and
staggering along the beach toward them. One raises his hand to them.*

Robert I think he's thirsty *Lucy* give him something to drink
[without thinking Lucy holds out her cocktail]
Robert I'm going to oh God my God what do we do oh there's even
a child we have to call for help I'll call emergency no not emer-
gency do you need *de'aide vous*
avez besoin medecin non Here here take my towel right you're
cold *Lucy* give them your towel give
Lucy I'm going to call the office they'll know how
No you don't want
Appeler le standard les gens de l'hôtel
Robert that's what you say *gens de l'hôtel*

But the *gens de l'hôtel* are of no use whatever.

Hotelkeeper Do you mind telling me what you're doing here
OH MY GOD OH MY GOD stay away from me I but who are you
No please please could you please put
Would you ask him to put that chicken down right away but
I'm sorry you don't have the right to come in here we're a private hotel
This brunch is for hotel clients you understand
Don't touch me DON'T touch me

For her part, Dido is not the proud queen we see in the *Aeneid* with her city's towers already rising to the skies, but a refugee like Aeneas and the Trojans, and she has the same ordeal millions more like her have all over the world today. Instead of the familiar Greco-Roman name "Dido," Kemeid uses her Semitic name, "Elissa." In Vergil Aeneas uses "Elissa" but once, and that in his parting words to her. This has a distancing effect, as Viktor Pöschl pointed out once in a lecture, as if to shove Dido away.

Immigration Officer I'm sorry Elissa you have to be patient

Elissa Before being patient I have to eat.

Immigration Officer Right of course I know I know but I can't issue you a work permit as long as your status isn't recognized you have to understand my situation Elissa

Elissa I left my country in order to survive it seems to me that suffices to make me a refugee

Immigration Officer You left your country you weren't expelled it's not the same thing for them

Elissa I left it before they could expulse me

Immigration Officer We wouldn't be in this situation if the reverse were true

Elissa If the reverse were true I wouldn't be here because I'd be dead

The inevitable ending of the story in the *Aeneid* is followed scrupulously. Aeneas loves Elissa, then abandons her to go on his quest for his homeland—an odyssey all important to him, and a brutal, meaningless betrayal to her.

And as in book 6 of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas goes down into the underworld to learn his destiny. There the shade of his father Anchises appears, and we have some advice about the future, just as in Vergil. But it isn't a glorious prophecy of Rome and her future greatness. It's an opening of our eyes into a realization that, whether we know it or not, and whether we care or not, refugees constitute our present history, our present reality. What shall we do with this history, this reality? Offer it a cocktail?

Anchises Now look at the souls you see in this place
Among them are many who committed no crime
But despite that they bend under sorrow's weight
These are exiled peoples
Looking for a land

Anchises' great speech in the *Aeneid* is then transformed into a catalogue aria of refugee peoples from all over the world. In a sense, it is the very opposite of the speech of Vergil's Anchises and his vision of the Rome of the future. It's a devolution, an unraveling of the body politic all over the world, not just West or East, or North or South, but everywhere. We are all refugees. There is no future Rome to aim for or go to.

Russian Jews looking for a new Odessa Algerians Bengalis walking towards India Cypriots Vietnamese fleeing Hanoi and Saigon Khmers Hazars from Afghanistan Guatemalans Miskito Indians from Nicaragua peoples from Mozambique Namibians fleeing Lubango Iraqi Kurds Somalis off to Ethiopia while Ethiopians run away Burmese Rohingya hidden in the swamps of Bangladesh Bhutanese arriving in Nepal Liberians in Sierra Leone mixed blood Tutsis and Hutus Tajiks Ossetians Kosovars Malians drowned in the Straights of Gibraltar Mexicans gunned down at Tijuana mutilated people from Angola Sudanese fleeing towards Kenya Congolese from Goma Palestinians from Gaza Iraqis Azerbaijanis Columbians Sri Lankas Goergians Haitians Dominicans Togolese Central Africans Chinese Indonesians and at the end of this long line of wanderers you and ours

You carry the seeds of your civilizations
You have the power to found nations
Or to destroy them.

Kemeid's *Aeneid* ends where we, in what was once called the New World, like to think we begin, where there are promises and hopes and optimism. Aeneas meets a "native," as they used to be called, an Elderly Farmer who reminds us of the rustic types that occasionally appear in ancient drama.

Elderly Farmer It's land

Right next to the river
That stretches towards the sunset beyond the pines on top of the
hills
If you want to give me a hand to harvest the wheat
And if you aren't too angry
You can settle there

You have blood on your hands

Aeneas Yes but don't be afraid
I left my hate at the foot of a barbed-wire fence

What I want is peace
Peace is what we all want
In our defeats we saw enough death
We passed through enough territories emptied by exile
We don't want to strew the plains with our bodies

Elderly Farmer Are there many of you?

Aeneas No doubt millions
But today there's only me Aeneas
My son
And a woman

Elderly Farmer Welcome Aeneas
Welcome to your home

[Aeneas sets his bag down. End]



I BEGAN BY pointing out why Jonathan Shay would not likely have been as inspired by the *Aeneid* as he was by Homer's poetry when he wrote *Achilles in Vietnam* and its sequel. I wonder if this would still be true today. Refugee peoples fleeing from invading armies, often composed of refugees themselves, are an increasing fact of life everywhere in our world.

The way the *Aeneid* weaves the myths of poetry and the events of history into a single skein may not have been attractive at one point, but it is very possibly the epic for our future, just as it was the epic for both Pöschl's and Putnam's past and present worlds. Titles like *Aeneas in Afghanistan*, *Aeneas in Libya*, or even *Aeneas in America* seem less fanciful by the day, and it is Olivier Kemeid who helps us to imagine them. A question yet to be answered is who the next generation's Viktor Pöschl and Michael Putnam will be, teachers and scholars ready to expound Vergil's poetry for this coming story. Will there be another Gerda Seligson? Another Martin Ostwald? The poetry of the *Aeneid* suggests that remote possibilities such as these may become reality sooner than we think. When they do we too shall need all the help we can get.

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