Poetry or Propaganda: Vergil's perspective and readers' responses to politics and patronage in the *Aeneid*

Vergil's praise of Octavian/Caesar Augustus, which is particularly strong in the *Aeneid*, continues to raise questions about his real purpose in writing that poem. It has been argued that, from Vergil's perspective, Octavian offered the hope of stabilizing Rome after a long series of civil wars. But this leaves open the question, why did the poem end with such disillusion? And has led to the conclusion that Vergil was at heart a 'pessimist' about the long-term hope of ever solving such conflicts. Some have suggested that Vergil was a willing propagandist for Octavian, and that the real purpose of his poem was to elevate Octavian by assigning to him qualities already attributed to other historical figures whose reputations represented real political threats to Octavian, such as Mark Antony's Dionysiac imagery, or the piety associated with Sextus Pompeius. What evidence exists—historically and archaeologically, as well as in art and literature, to support or disprove these and similar theses about Vergil, Augustus and attitudes toward him during his reign? For other scholars this question of intent, no matter what its answer, has developed into a further issue of "Why?".

This panel proposes to explore and debate these questions though a number of approaches, including not only how Vergil's contemporaries—poets, historians, architects, and other intellectuals and artists—responded to Octavian, but the broader question of what lies beneath the surface not only in Augustan Rome, but in the reception of this work through the readings of its audiences as well as its reception by later poets who themselves construct their *Aeneid* and its meanings through their works. The goal of the panel is not a definitive yes/no answer, but a series of studies that advance the discussion and provide new evidence and arguments for the social, political, literary and artistic context of the *Aeneid.*

Paper #1: Poetry Not Propaganda: Horace's and Vergil's Poetics of Indeterminacy

Whenever an artist is supported by a patron, that artist's work becomes suspect.
How much of the product results from obligation, and to what degree does "working for

hire" effect quality? Or does the artist maintain independence by encoding resistance into the art? Vergil's *Aeneid* is caught in the extremes of such questions, and answers tend so strongly toward the political that Vergil's readers split into factions: "pro- and anti-Augustan." Politics will not end the debate. On one hand, Aeneas is the personification of Roman heroism, exacting vengeance on an oath-breaker, just as Octavian saved Rome from insurrection (Aug. *R.G.* 1-2). On the other, Aeneas symbolizes Rome's propensity for violence and domination. Aeneas, in contrast to Augustus' policy of clemency (Aug. *R.G.* 3), killed the suppliant as he pleaded for mercy. Within the politics of the *Aeneid*, there is both positive and negative.

Since Vergil's *Aeneid* does not permit an either/or political resolution, it is necessary to change the question. We should ask not whether Vergil wrote his grand Roman epic without a definitive political resolution, but why did he. I will argue that the indetermination in the *Aeneid* is foremost an aesthetic choice, which in turn can have political ramifications. First, the "Augustan" poets knew that patronage was an essential component in their image, and did not shy away from the questions it raised (e.g., Verg. *Ecl.* 6.1-8; Hor. *Epist.* II.1.231-270). Second, their poetics, even in their most panegyric moments, intended to leave interpretive space for the audience. The inclusion of such space is good poetics, since it draws the audience together into a creative relationship with both artist and subject (Hor. *C.* I.24; *Ars* 1-13; 453-476). Consequently, value judgments of a socio-political nature are not the exclusive right of artist or patron but belong also to the Roman audience/community (*cano/canemus*, Verg. *Aen.* 1.1; Hor. *C.* IV.15.25-32). It is the indetermination in the politics of the *Aeneid* that make it perfectly complete.

Paper #2: Poetry and Propaganda: Vergil's *Aeneid* and the Temple of Mars Ultor in the Forum Augustum

The memory of the civil war in Rome did not die with Octavian's victory at Actium. One of Augustus' goals in establishing his rule at Rome was not only to place the civil war within the framework of Rome's new cultural and social identity, but also to find ways of reconfiguring the traumatic effects of war, and especially civil war, on the many

individual Romans who either fought or lost family members in this bloody, lengthy struggle. His great success in transforming Roman consciousness of this event is attributable, I believe, to the reshaping of both Roman literature and physical space within Rome to accommodate and incorporate the conflicting and often opposing views of the civil war among the many Romans who survived it. In this paper I argue that two primary works, Vergil's *Aeneid* and the Temple of Mars Ultor in the Forum Augustum, served Augustus' purpose of providing literary and physical locations for an array of emotions about the civil war to be placed and cathartically transformed into feelings of unity and solidarity about the new state.

Paul Zanker (1988: 192-207) has articulated many of the levels of ideology expressed in the building program of the Forum Augustum, but focuses on the political and social aspects of Augustus' program of legitimizing the new Julian dynasty with its new mythology and history. But a no less important achievement of both the *Aeneid* and the Temple of Mars Ultor itself was to provide a symbolic focus for the raw emotions and ambivalent feelings aroused by the civil war. David Kertzer (57-76) has argued persuasively that the ambiguity of political and social symbolism allows each person to experience the symbol differently with no explicit articulation of those differences necessary. Thus the power of these symbols lies in the fact that they emphasize political and social unity over perhaps vast differences in perception. In the *Aeneid*, and particularly in Book 12, the battle between Aeneas and Turnus, while representing symbolically Augustus' inevitable, justified struggles with his opponents, nonetheless concerns the mythical hero of all Romans and not just Augustus; so that Romans of whatever stripe in the civil war could read into Aeneas' struggle their own struggle to preserve the Roman state, however they envisioned that state. The battle operates on another symbolic level as well. Lawrence Tritle, Jonathan Shay, and John Keegan have documented the sometimes devastating and traumatic effects on individuals engaged in hand-to-hand combat, the situation normally experienced in ancient warfare. Numerous passages in *Aeneid* 12 (e.g., 101-9; 324-82; 494-553; 887-952) detail explicit, excessive battle emotions and reactions that lie far outside acceptable peacetime behavior, but nonetheless match modern observations of battle behavior. These passages then, not exaggerations but representations of combat reality, had the effect, I argue, of providing

another level of symbolic restructuring of the civil war. They cathartically transformed the civil war experiences of individual Roman veterans into the mythical and but fully justifiable experiences of Aeneas in his struggles with Turnus. Vergil's details of emotion and behavior allowed every combatant to relive and reframe his own bloody experience in the symbolic and unifying tale of Rome's ancient hero (cf. Tacitus, *Dialogus* 13, for the enthusiastic reception of Vergil's verses by the general public in theatrical recitations).

In the same way, the Temple of Mars Ultor, placed prominently in the center of the Forum Augustum, functioned as another important symbol, architectural rather than literary, around which the many conflicting views of the civil war could gather and be unified. It provided a powerful, visual focus for the raw emotions and ambivalent feelings aroused by the civil war. It could transform the traumatic emotions of combat itself into the more acceptable attributes of the god of war. As a symbol it could represent and embody the conflicting and ultimately irreconcilable feelings of the winners as well as the losers. The divine symbol of war and revenge could encompass and focus all of these inarticulate feelings, feelings that not only were unarticulated but, in some cases in the new Rome, were dangerous to articulate.

Rome's civil war generated both generalized feelings of trauma among all the combatants and irreconcilable views of the outcome of the conflict. By providing symbols that could manage, contain and transform these dark consequences of his bloody, lengthy struggle, Augustus could turn to the more positive task of building, architecturally, culturally and socially, the new Rome of his vision.

Bibliography:

Keegan, J. 1976. *The Face of Battle*. London.

Kertzer, D. 1988. *Ritual, Politics, and Power*. New Haven.

Shay, J. 1994. *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. New York.

Tritle, L. 1997. "Hector's Body: Mutilation of the Dead in Ancient Greece and Vietnam." *AHB* 11: 123-36.

_____ 2000. *From Melos to My Lai: War and Survival*. London, NewYork.

Paper #3: Vergil at Sperlonga: Poetry, Statues and Imperial Reception of the *Aeneid*

Recent work by some scholars, notably Anne Weis, has concluded a Vergilian influence in the assemblage of sculpture at the Tiberian villa at Sperlonga. Most notably the colossal Scylla and Polyphemus groups are believed to derive from the descriptions of these events in Vergil's *Aeneid*. These arguments of Vergilian influence fail to touch on the decisions behind the entire program in the cave. Examining the major groups, which many scholars date to Augustus, we see a correspondence between their selection and a key passage in the *Aeneid*. In this paper, I argue that the subjects of Scylla and Polyphemus were initially selected to illustrate *Aeneid* 1.198-203 where these events are mentioned together in the context of dangers passed.

The creation of a formalized stage presenting these images and themes at Sperlonga allowed Augustus to reference himself as the new Aeneas creating a notion of himself guiding Rome through the past dangers of the civil wars. Their use in a dining context is reinforced by Suetonius' account of Caligula quoting this passage in a dining context. Their appearance here demonstrates the Augustan acceptance of the *Aeneid* as a tool for positive propaganda. The subsidiary and life-size Pasquino and Palladium groups extend the ideological display by referencing events in Roman poetry, notably Vergil and Ovid, as metaphors for public acts by Tiberius: his attending his brother's corpse and the restoration of the Temple of Vesta following a fire.

Paper #4: "et mentem mortalia tangunt": Reception of the *Aeneid* and the question of authorial intent

A persistent question in Vergilian scholarship and criticism concerns authorial intent. Why did Vergil write the *Aeneid*? Scholars, critic, poets, and readers have been asking this since the Age of Augustus. The question of Vergil's intent in writing the Aeneid is closely allied to the question of the poem's meaning and the question concerning the narrative of the *Aeneid*. This essay surveys the major twentieth-century theories concerning Vergil's intent in writing the *Aeneid* and adopts a perspective that synthesizes

pessimistic and optimistic readings of the epic. More controversially I suggest that in the reception of Vergil in the post-Classical world, especially through new artworks created in the Classical Tradition, we glimpse the power of the *Aeneid's* meaning and Vergil's purpose in writing the poem. A look at reception of the *Aeneid* in literature and art since antiquity quickly reveals the emphasis later generations placed on Books One through Six in spite of Vergil's own apparent belief that the greater order of things came into being in Book Seven. Ultimately the humanity inherent in the Dido and Aeneas episode compels us towards them and their story. Ironically, the imperial mission, as well as the human cost of empire, is much more discernible in the first half of the epic than in the stock epic combat backed by divine patrons that we see in the Turnus episode.

Paper #5: Misreading in Vergil and Dante: Or How We Readers Miss the Point

Instances of misreading of the first (thus paradigmatically placed) internal (manmade) artworks appear in both Vergil (*Aen*. 1) and Dante (*Inf*. 5), demonstrating thereby the poets' awareness of this phenomenon of misreading and some of its causes. The fact that it has taken centuries in both cases for these misreadings to become commonly recognized as such demonstrates the exemplarity of the poets' representations. In both cases, one notes, the modeled misreadings are self-affirming. Aeneas, the defeated Trojan, looks at paintings of Trojan War battles and sees in them, not celebration of Juno's victory [it's HER temple!], but sympathy for defeated Trojans. Francesca, reading of the passionate kiss of the adulterers Lancelot and Guinevere, enacts the text (through adulterous sex with Paolo), instead of dispassionately studying it. As Francesca reads courtly poetry, she sees her own passion and sensitivity validated and endorsed. "Love that can quickly seize the gentle heart…love that releases no beloved from loving…love led the two of us unto one death" (*Inf*. 5.100-106 , trans. Mandelbaum). These scenes of misreading bring to the fore its frequency, its dangers, and its self-affirming direction. In these ways they function as cautionary for us readers, who might then infer that, however we read these texts, we are likely missing the artists' intention and flattering ourselves in the process.

Paper #6: Translating Dido: Catherine the Great in the *Aeneid*

After Peter the Great's reforms the presence of Greco-Roman classics in Russian culture acquired certain permanence. Responses to Vergil first started in the eighteenth century with the failed attempts at national epics by Mikhail Lomonosov, Antiokh Kantemir, and Mikhail Kheraskov. However, the most illustrative example of how Vergil was used at that time is in fact the first translation of the *Aeneid* by Vasilii Petrov. The vision of the monarch, which shapes Petrov's translation of the Aeneid, owes its inspiration to Lomonosov's call for a poem in Vergilian manner to commemorate the achievements of a Russian ruler. From 1772, when the first book of Vergil's poem appeared in print to 1786 Petrov devoted himself to the translation of the *Aeneid*. It appeared in full only in the years 1801-6. It seems that the books that primarily attracted Petrov's poetic zeal and prompted him in his task were concerned with Dido. After Book 6, when Dido completely disappears from the scene, so does Petrov's inspiration. So why Dido? The answer is self-evident and yet puzzling. 'Dux femina facti': Virgil's remark on the unusual phenomenon of a female ruler might well be applied to the *Aeneid* read as a celebration of Catherine the Great.

This talk explores the historical and cultural context that shaped the controversial nature of the first Russian translation of the *Aeneid* as it was turned into the state-sponsored discourse. Although it did not earn Petrov literary accolades from his peers, it showed how even the work of translation can serve ideological purposes. In Dido's mouth Petrov placed the vocabulary and topoi of Catherine's own encomiasts. Translation of the Roman national epic by Petrov became the extension of the so-called "Greek project" so ardently promoted by Voltaire and embraced by Catherine. But more importantly, for Catherine and for Petrov himself the translation claimed Russian tsarina's and Russia's rightful place in the family of European not Asiatic nations.