THE SILENCE OF VERGIL AND THE END OF THE AENEID

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In the Aeneid Vergil is particularly careful to remain silent on many points which might easily have been made explicit. This silence should be recognized and respected, for resolving it with certainty would mar the poem’s artistic reticence. In fact, by his very silence on certain points, Vergil reinforces the ambivalence of the poem’s final scene. Thus the silence of Vergil is interpretively significant, and suggests a new perspective on the much-debated end of the poem.

In speaking of this silence I do not mean simply that Vergil often does not answer certain questions which we wish he had (for example, what is that business of the Gate of Ivory all about?). Rather, I am speaking primarily of occasions when his use of specific elements from the literary tradition creates certain expectations in the minds of the audience, but the poet does not tell us whether these expectations are fulfilled. I shall give a couple of examples of this practice before focusing on the end of the poem.

In Book Six, on his Underworld journey, Aeneas sees the torments of the famous sinners in Tartarus. The literary tradition had built up a list of persons usually named in such descents into the Underworld. Homer started it by naming Tityus, Tantalus, and Sisyphus (Odyssey 11.576-600; cf. Plato, Gorgias 525 E). Lucretius’ list of great sinners in Tartarus

* This essay has its origins in a paper Professor Edgeworth presented at the 2004 Annual Meeting of the American Philological Association, “The Silence of Vergil,” a version of which he had submitted to Vergilius before his death on October 22, 2004. I would like to thank Mrs. Kathleen Edgeworth for entrusting me with the task of revising that submission, as well as the editor of Vergilius for her support of my role as posthumous editor, a role that allows me to acknowledge my deep respect for Professor Edgeworth as a colleague and as a wonderfully learned man of great integrity. My primary contribution has been to incorporate the contents of his 2003 APA paper, “The End of the Aeneid,” into the essay he originally submitted, in the belief that this expansion sharpens and extends the argument. Thus I am responsible for the focus of the argument in this version, as well as some of its structuring, but all of its ideas, and indeed almost all of its words, are his.

Vergilius 51 (2005) 3-11
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consists of Tantalus, Tityus, Sisyphus, and the Danaids (*De Rerum Natura* 3.980-1010). By Augustan times the list had become somewhat expanded. Tibullus (at 1.3.71-80) gives us Ixion, Tityus, and the Danaids. Horace gives us Ixion, Tityus, and the Danaids in one poem (*Odes* 3.11.21-52), Tityus, Sisyphus, and the Danaids in another (*Odes* 2.14.8-20). Ovid gives us several lists: at *Metamorphoses* 4.457-63 we have Tityus, Tantalus, Sisyphus, Ixion, and the Danaids, while at 10.41-44 we find Tantalus, Ixion, the Danaids, Tityus (though unnamed), and Sisyphus. Similarly in the *Ibis* (171-80): Sisyphus, the Danaids, Tantalus, and Tityus. Vergil’s list (6.580-627) is the most comprehensive of them all, incorporating either by name or by distinctive manner of punishment all of these figures and more. But there is one great exception: the Danaids are not mentioned. Why not? Does Vergil not think their deeds worthy of condemnation to Tartarus? Vergil’s silence about their condition stands against the expectation of the literary tradition, a silence that adds significance to where they do ultimately appear in the poem.

A second example of a significant Vergilian silence comes at *Aeneid* 10.517-20, when Aeneas takes eight prisoners of war and intends to offer them as human sacrifices to the dead Pallas. The episode is clearly modeled on *Iliad* 21.27-28, where Achilles takes twelve prisoners to sacrifice to the spirit of Patroclus. Homer leaves us in no doubt as to their fate: we are reminded of Achilles’ intention at 23.22-23, and at 23.175-77 he kills them with his own hands at Patroclus’ pyre. This antecedent creates an expectation in the minds of Vergil’s audience, for whom detailed knowledge of Homer is a given: either Aeneas will fulfill his intention, like Achilles, or else (less probably) he will change his mind and spare his prisoners in a striking and significant departure from the model. But instead, at *Aeneid* 11.81-93 Aeneas sends them off to Evander, and we never learn anything more about them. Do they live or die? Does *clementia* (mercy) trump *furor* (rage)? Either way, the outcome would have had strong implications for one’s reading of the end of the poem. But instead, what we get is: silence.

In discussing the final scene of the poem, the customary view is that Aeneas rejects Turnus’ plea. The merits of the decision are then hotly debated. But in fact Turnus makes two pleas, offering Aeneas his choice: *either* spare my life, or return my body to my aged father Daunus (12.932-36). Aeneas does reject the first plea; but it is astonishing that Vergil refuses to tell us whether the second plea will be granted or
denied. Since the expectations of the original hearers of the *Aeneid* were conditioned in large part by their knowledge of the *Iliad*, and the final book of the *Iliad* concerns itself primarily with the question of the return to an aged father of the corpse of a fallen antagonist, the natural expectation would be that the end of the “Iliadic” portion of the *Aeneid* would pay considerable attention to this subject. Instead: not one word. This silence flies in the face of the audience’s expectations, and hence should have been the subject of intense critical discussion long before now. It has not.

Though strongest at the end of the *Iliad*, Homer’s preoccupation with the proper treatment of the corpse of a fallen foe is prominent throughout the poem. At *Iliad* 6.416-20 Andromache stresses that Achilles showed proper respect for the corpse of her father Étion. At *Iliad* 7.79-86 Hector proposes, before his duel with Telamonian Ajax, that both sides swear to return the corpse of the fallen to his own people. He proposes the same stipulation to Achilles, in vain, at *Iliad* 22.256-59. In contrast to the expectations thus set up by Homeric precedent, the oaths sworn by Aeneas and Latinus at *Aeneid* 12.175-221, oaths that are to secure the terms for the duel between Aeneas and Turnus, say nothing of a return of bodies.

One may object that Vergil intends to end his work at a pitch of feverish intensity and hence any attention to the corpse’s fate would have provided a degree of narrative and emotional decompression which the poet chooses to reject. But on the contrary, it would have been quite easy for Vergil to adumbrate the future obsequies of Turnus, for example as part of Jupiter’s prophecy to Juno (12.830-40) or as, say, part of an authorial apostrophe to Juturna. After all, he has managed to tell us what will happen later on to Aeneas: he will die before his time, but will be deified (1.259-60, 4.615-20, 12.794-95).

Another objection is that Aeneas will return the body because he did so in the case of Lausus (10.827-28). But the two killings are a study in

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1 An example of a critical approach which seeks to abolish this silence is afforded by Richard Jenkyns, *Virgil’s Experience* (Oxford 1998), 67: “Virgil is moving with such rapidity that he does not pause to tell us if this supplication [‘return my body’] is granted, but he does not need to, for we are sure that it is.” We can be sure of no such thing.

2 Note how Vergil is also silent about whether Turnus swears this oath. We are told at 12.175-221 that Aeneas takes the oath, that Latinus takes the oath, that Turnus steps forward and venerates the altar and ... then Vergil cuts away and changes the subject.
contrasts. Aeneas is filled with pity and compassion at the death of Lausus: miserans ("feeling pity", 10.823), 'miserande puer' ("O pitiful boy", 10.825). He kills Turnus while furiis accensus et ira terribilis ("aflame with rage and terrifying in his anger," 12.946-47). Moreover, Lausus was not wearing the armor of a fallen protégé of Aeneas. What might his rage now prompt Aeneas to do to Turnus’ corpse, and will he succumb to it?

The question is not an idle one, for the treatment of the corpse of Mezentius raises uneasiness in the reader’s mind. As Mezentius dies he, too, begs Aeneas for a favor. He begs for proper burial after his death, and for Aeneas to ward off the rage of Mezentius’ own rebel subjects (10.903-6). How would this rage manifest itself? Surely in abuse of the corpse, especially in view of the treatment of Hector’s corpse by the Achaeans at Iliad 22.369-75. But evidently rage was vented upon the corpse, for we learn at Aeneid 11.9-10 that Mezentius’ breastplate had been pierced in twelve places. Aeneas had wounded him in the groin with his spear (10.785-86), then dispatched him with a sword-thrust to the throat (10.907-8). Since neither blow cut through the breastplate, and twelve piercings are too many to be plausible as near misses sustained in battle, these piercings are inflicted post mortem. Whose rage inflicted them? Aeneas”? If so, it would create a grim expectation in the mind of the reader at the time of Turnus’ plea. The Etruscans”? If the latter, was the mutilation done with or without Aeneas’ consent – that is, did he reject Mezentius’ dying plea? Vergil is silent on all these points.

Does the treatment of Turnus’ corpse make any difference? A great deal. Homer rarely expresses, in sua persona, judgments on the moral quality of his characters’ actions, but he does so emphatically in the case of Achilles’ abuse of Hector’s corpse. These acts are twice described as ἀεικέα . . . ἐγγα ("disgraceful deeds," Iliad 22.395, 23.24), characteristic of a man whose heart is bereft of all feelings of justice (so says Apollo at 24.40-41). In contrast, Achilles’ acceptance of Priam’s ransom for the body is described as οὐκ ἀεικέα ("not disgraceful," 24.594). Homer’s emphasis suggests how more is at issue than the corpse itself. Reconciliation, the main theme of Iliad Twenty-Four, is thereby expected but painfully absent in Aeneid Twelve. It is true that the Trojans and the Latins are to become one people (12.834-40), but Vergil sternly resisted the temptation to present, even as prolepsis, a reconciliation.

scene between Aeneas and Daunus. Through this silence, in which he leaves open both the possibility that the body of Turnus be shamefully abused by Aeneas and the possibility that it be returned with proper honors, Vergil directly contributes to the uncertainty about Aeneas’ moral standing at the end of the poem.

Certainly the most disputed aspect of Vergilian studies for the past generation has been the interpretation of Aeneas’ action in the final scene of the Aeneid. “No single scene in Latin literature has proved to be as great an ideological battleground as the end of the Aeneid,” writes Barbara Weiden Boyd.4 Understandably so: one’s reading of the meaning of the poem as a whole must be informed in large part by one’s “take” on the ending. The two principal interpretive viewpoints may be described as optimistic and pessimistic. To the former group certainly belong Karl Galinsky, Hans-Peter Stahl, Francis Cairns, and for the most part Viktor Pöschl and Brooks Otis.5 In their eyes Aeneas does what is right and proper killing Turnus, rejecting his plea for mercy. The latter group marshals the talents of Michael Putnam, Richard Thomas, R. O. A. M. Lyne, Steven Farron, and for the most part W. R. Johnson.6 In their perspective Aeneas fails in his mission, abandoning his obligations to pietas and clementia in a surrender to that sense of furo which has been, in various guises, the “villain” of the poem. Although it might be

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suggested that Vergil’s intent was to provide the reader with a free choice between these (supposedly) mutually exclusive interpretations, more commonly it is contended that the author intended only one of these readings and excluded the other.

I contend that each view is largely correct, but faulty in assuming that we must choose between the two. Aeneas both triumphs and fails. Vergil’s poem is concerned both with the moral dimension and with the eschatological dimension of human choices. Vergil’s probable intent, I argue, is that the reader both be horrified at the enormity of Aeneas’ failure in the moral order and be relieved that by his failure the proper eschatological order of events is secured.7

Pöschl tells us that the overmastering and suppression of furor is the main theme of the poem.8 Furor is linked explicitly and repeatedly to the devastating harm wrought by Juno, Allecto, and even Amata. Furor is what kills Dido. Furor must be bound in a hundred brazen links (1.294-96). Pietas, on the other hand, is the special hallmark of Aeneas, as Vergil tells us prominently, and is the quality in which the Romans are to surpass even the gods themselves, according to Jupiter (12.838-39). It is clearly a virtue, perhaps one should say the supreme virtue – or, better, a complex of related virtues. Given the apparent and sustained opposition between these two key elements, we are almost completely unprepared for the ending, which presents a stunning reversal. It is sometimes said that Vergil tends to undercut everything he affirms;9 here at the end he undercuts even pietas itself, the foundation of the moral order, and redeems the worth of ugly furor, upon which the eschatological order of events is shown (in part) to depend.

The key moment comes at Aeneid 12.940-41, when Aeneas begins to yield to Turnus’ plea. Will he exercise clementia? Many assume that Anchises’ injunction at Aeneid 6.853 (parcere subiectis et debellare superbos) requires him to do so. But in fact Anchises enjoins very different treatment for the superbis and the subiecti, while Turnus in the

7 In using the term “eschatological” here, I refer not to the end of the cosmos, but simply to the course of future events, and in particular to that future state of justice, peace, and harmony in which the human race, in its better moments, desires to live.
8 See Pöschl (note 5, above) 13-33.
final scene of the poem can be seen as simultaneously superbus and subiectus: here paternal wisdom has reached its limits.

From a moral perspective, Aeneas does the wrong thing – not in that he slays Turnus, but that he does so in a total surrender to rage, in which, as Putnam argues, he takes on the persona of Juno herself.10 Surrender to rage, especially after deliberation, is per se an immoral act, judged by the standards established by the poem in its treatment of furor over the previous twelve books. Yet if Aeneas exercises clementia, then Rome will never rise, for Turnus has been shown repeatedly to be a promise-breaker who would backstab the Trojan at the first opportunity.11 Given the character of Turnus as shown in the text, he would, if spared, certainly not shake hands amicably and go back to spend his days peacefully in Ardea forevermore. Character, we are told, is destiny.

But Rome must rise, since it is to be the vehicle by which the world may finally attain peace and unity; this is clearly affirmed in Book Six in passages which are just as Vergilian as the darker ones. However, Aeneas’ humanitas inclines him to make the “wrong” decision (the merciful one). Astoundingly, Aeneas does what must be done precisely because he succumbs to the demonic force of rage, which saves the day when virtue fails, even though we are repulsed by its moral ugliness. Vergil sets up a tension between pietas and furor in Book One, sustains it, then shows at the very last that the key moments in history require a person (or a people) whose pietas is genuine but can give place to bloody furor in its turn. Aeneas is such a person, the Romans are such a people; their character is their destiny.12

Many previous readings of this scene have fallen short in part because the legacy of the Christian interpretive tradition has imposed a false dichotomy: to do evil is never acceptable, hence the killing must either be not really evil or else utterly reprehensible. Mercy is assumed to be always the “better” choice, but Vergil knew that the clementia exercised by the great Julius ultimately brought disaster both to the man and to the Roman world, while the horrors of the proscriptions proved to be a prelude to the Pax Augusta.

In crafting the ending as he did, Vergil has come up with a resolution

10 See Putnam (note 6, above) 190-201, and, more recently, his “Forward” to Quinn (note 9, above) vii-xii.
11 See Stahl (note 5, above).
12 Elizabeth Henry, The Vigour of Prophecy (Carbondale 1989), 177: “The moral ambiguity in Virgil’s judgment on Aeneas – and so on Rome’s generals, magistrates, priests, emperors, for Aeneas is all these – is profound.”
of the age-old Problem of Evil. The hoped-for future, humankind’s goal, rests in part on evil deeds, and it cannot be otherwise. The tree which bears the golden apples of peace and harmony is rooted in the dung-hill of slaughter and revenge. Pietas is not enough. This fact does not make evil good (or even excusable in moral terms), merely necessary in eschatological terms. Moral claims do not eliminate the validity of eschatological demands, nor vice versa: both are valid, yet sometimes conflicting. And this is our sad fate: we are caught between the two. Even the good person cannot go through life with clean hands. How we wish it were not so, but this is an inescapable part of the tragedy of the human condition. This knowledge, this revelation, grinds the heart in sorrow and yet gives hope in darkness.

Masterfully, it is the sight of Pallas’ baldric which tips the scales for Aeneas (12.941-46), the baldric on which is engraved the infamous act of the Danaids (10.496-99). Now we can understand why Vergil does not tell us whether the Danaids are in Hell. Their deed is simultaneously an opus pietatis (for they are carrying out their father’s will) and assuredly a horrifying nefas (as the poet himself declares at 10.497). Their deed is also Aeneas’ deed, as their presence on the fatal baldric surely implies: pietas and nefas are inextricably bound. The baldric is the last element in a series in which Aeneas fails to draw the inferences from works of art which are most evident to the reader. Standing at the Temple of Juno at Carthage and viewing the murals which depict that goddess wreaking terrible vengeance on her hated foes, the Trojans, Aeneas tells Achates, “Relax: we’re safe here” (1.463). Viewing the reliefs of Daedalus and

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14 Sarah Spence, “Cinching the Text: The Danaids and the End of the Aeneid,” Vergilius 37 (1991): 11-19, shows how there were good reasons, both of public policy and of public art, for the Danaids to be on the minds of Vergil’s contemporaries. See further her contribution to Anderson and Quartarone (note 4, above): “Pietas and Furor: Motivational Forces in the Aeneid,” 46-52. She stresses the interdependence of pietas and furor, while I say that furor depends, not on pietas, but on human moral weakness, and that what depends upon furor is not pietas, but the future (sometimes for good, sometimes for ill).
Icarus on the temple doors at Cumae, which depict a gulf between father and son imposed by death, so vast that it cannot be bridged (6.14-33), he responds by saying, “I want to see my father again” (6.106-9). He gazes upon the scenes of future history engraved upon his great shield and, despite his earlier “guided tour” of Elysium, we are told that he simply does not understand (8.730). Here, too, at the very end of the poem, he looks upon a representation of pietas and nefas inextricably mixed, and understands nothing. Instead, he feels . . . and he acts.

And here we are, gazing at the Aeneid and beginning to suspect that the Aeneid itself is exactly such a baldric, a great work of art which depicts the bivalent nature of human action.16 It does so through its length and breadth, but never more forcefully than here at its end. Yet one great reason for the Aeneid’s ceaseless pull on human hearts and minds is that many readers somehow sense that the poem’s ambivalence is the way humanity is. We wish it were not so; what we long for is that cool, lucid clarity of justice for which we are forever doomed to thirst . . . in vain. Vergil knows about the darkness within the human heart and he shows it to us plainly here at the end of the Aeneid. But Vergil gives us more than tears for the way things are (1.462); he gives us hope. For the darkest deed that you or I shall ever do, even though it be to our everlasting discredit, may yet prove to be the cornerstone on which the brightest of futures may rest. Be it so!

Be it so.

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