

ARCTOS

ACTA PHILOLOGICA FENNICA

VOL. XXI

HELSINKI 1987 HELSINGFORS

INDEX

Christer Bruun	Water for the Castra Praetoria. What were the Severan <i>operamina</i> ?	7
Siegfried Jäkel	Kritische Beobachtungen zum Programm einer Literatur-Pädagogik in Plutarchs Schrift <i>De audiendis poetis</i>	19
Mika Kajava	<i>Varus</i> and <i>Varia</i>	37
Klaus Karttunen	The Country of Fabulous Beasts and Naked Philosophers. India in Classical and Medieval Literature	43
Saara Lilja	Sunbathing in Antiquity	53
Bengt Löfstedt	Zu Bedas Evangelienkommentaren	61
Olivier Masson	Quelques noms grecs récents en -μάτιος	73
Teivas Oksala	T. S. Eliot's Conception of Virgil and Virgilian Scholarship	79
H.K. Riikonen	Petronius and Modern Fiction. Some Comparative Notes	87
Olli Salomies	Weitere republikanische Inschriften.	105
Timo Sironen	Osservazioni sulle grafie per le occlusive aspirate d'origine greca nell'osco	109
Heikki Solin	Analecta epigraphica CXIII—CXX.	119
E.M. Steinby	Il lato orientale del Foro Romano. Proposte di lettura	139
Leena Talvio	Sulla figura della Fortuna nel Sogno del Faraone.	185
Rolf Westman	Unbeachteter epikureischer Bericht bei Plutarch (<i>Qu. conviv.</i> 5, 1).	195
De novis libris iudicia.		203
Index librorum in hoc volumine recensorum		243
Libri nobis missi.		245

T.S. Eliot's Conception of Virgil and Virgilian Scholarship*

TEIVAS OKSALA

I will concentrate on two papers by Eliot, "Virgil and the Christian World?" (BBC 1951) and "What is a Classic?" (1944). My purpose is to shed light on the relation between Eliot's Virgil critique and Virgilian scholarship and to test some of his basic arguments.

While scholarly erudition represents professional assuredness, the insights of an amateur usually fall short of this level, or, at best, occasionally reach it to be dismissed as interesting curiosities. An amateur falls victim to generalizations and often forgets that antiquity was as pluralistic an age as is the age in which we live. A brilliant poet can at best rise above the level of scholarship and, like a divine light, illuminate the essential connections. T.S. Eliot is undoubtedly such a poet: his insights offer a real challenge for a scholar to engage in critical dialogue with him. Such dialogue has to a large extent been absent. For example, the American Virgil scholar Brooks Otis, author of "Virgil and the Civilized Poetry" (1963), dismisses Eliot with a brief note without engaging in constructive discussion.¹

In his radio talk "Virgil and the Christian World"² Eliot gives his opinion about the poet's main works. In the *Bucolics* attention is directed

* This paper originates in a seminar at Jyväskylä University "T.S. Eliot and the Reception of his Work" (2—3 May 1986).

¹ *Op. cit.* 295 n. 1.

² Published in *The Listener* and in *On Poetry and Poets*, London 1957, 121—131.

towards the fourth Eclogue, which, as is generally known, was interpreted by Christians as a prophecy. How are we to understand the infant boy, the *cara deum suboles, magni Iovis incrementum*, “dear offspring of the gods, great scion of Jupiter”? The *interpretatio Christiana* has become generally accepted since the time of Constantine the Great,³ although St Jerome, as a philologist, dismissed it as childish nonsense.⁴ Eliot is familiar with both “realistic” and “idealistic” interpretations, aiming at a synthesis between them, and, at the same time, he distinguishes between the levels of conscious and “prophetic” experience. On the one hand, he takes it for granted “that Virgil himself was consciously concerned only with domestic affairs or with Roman politics”, on the other hand he gives crucial significance to unconscious inspiration (op. cit. 122—123): “A poet may believe that he is expressing only his private experience; his lines may be for him only a means of talking about himself without giving himself away; yet for his readers what he has written may come to be the expression both of their own secret feelings and of the exultation or despair of a generation. He need not know what his poetry will come to mean to others; and a prophet need not understand the prophetic meaning of his utterance.” In so saying Eliot is in fact very near to both Plato and St Augustine. According to Plato a poet was *entheos*, ‘exalted’ and was not aware what he was saying;⁵ according to St Augustine, Virgil did not consciously refer to Christ, rather God spoke through him.⁶ Here Eliot made a mistake when he considered St Augustine to be a typical representative of the Christian interpretation. All in all, irrespective of what Virgil thought, the divine infant became established as the symbol of peace and of the modern era.

Eliot says he was inspired by Theodor Haecker’s book *Virgil, Vater des Abendlandes*, ‘Virgil, Father of the West’ (1931), which had also

³ To this problem see Ciro Monteleone, in *Enciclopedia Virgiliana* s.v. Costantino I, and Aldo Ceresa-Gastaldo, *ibid.* s.v. Cristianesimo.

⁴ Hier. epist. 53,7: *Puerilia sunt haec et circulatorum ludo similia, docere quod ignores, immo . . . nec hoc quidem scire, quod nescias*. See Paolo Siniscalco, in *Enciclopedia Virgiliana* s.v. Gerolamo.

⁵ Ion 533c—536d.

⁶ Aug. civ. 10, 27.

inspired *Der Tod des Vergil*, 'The Death of Virgil' by the Austrian Hermann Broch. Haecker describes Virgil with the phrase *anima naturaliter Christiana*. Like Haecker, Eliot focuses his analysis on Virgil's key concepts *labor, pietas, fatum*.

In my opinion the picture Eliot gives of the *Georgics* remains narrow. He takes the aesthetic function of the poem and its philosophical message to be a description of manual labour, "but at least Christianity did establish the principle that action and contemplation, labour and prayer, are both essential to the life of the complete man" (op. cit. 126). However, the natural philosophical dimensions of the *Georgics*, its pantheism which is also reflected in the well-organized and coherent language, rich in nuances, remain beyond the reach of his criticism. We, who live in the age of ecology, seem to be better off in this respect.

When speaking about the civilized world of Virgil, Eliot thinks above all of the *Aeneid*. How does the *Aeneidian* world differ from the Homeric world? Ever since antiquity, Virgil has been accused of having plagiarized Homer. Modern philology, free from the prejudice and bias of the previous century, no longer looks upon Virgil as a slavish imitator of Homer; on the contrary, Virgil is regarded as a brilliant reformer of the epic, whose independence manifests itself most clearly in his relationship to Homer. The more we examine the thousands of connections between Virgil and Homer, the more sovereign is the creative independence of the author of the *Aeneid*.

Eliot compares the *Iliad* with the *Aeneid* primarily in the light of his school experience (op. cit. 123—125). He found the Homeric world forbidding. Achilles to him was "a ruffian", and the deep humanism of the hero of the *Iliad*, his tragic temper and magnanimity,⁷ who in the midst of all the senseless killing was capable of greater nobility than any other hero of the Trojan War, including Aeneas, remained beyond his grasp. I should like to mention here that Eino Leino, the greatest Finnish poet, regarded Achilles as the very image of the civilized, tragic, Nietzschean hero but could not get a real grip on *Aeneid*.⁸ I must admit that I am very

⁷ C.M. Bowra, *Tradition and Design in the Iliad*, Oxford 1930, 192—202.

⁸ Eino Leino, *Maailmankirjailijoita. Toim. Aarre M. Peltonen*, Jyväskylä 1978, 11—14.

disappointed with both Eliot and Leino in this respect, but it seems to be typical of men of genius that the most brilliant flashes of insight can be followed by an incomprehensible blindness. But Eliot would not be himself if he did not transfer his early school experience on to the level of principle: “I have modified my early opinions — the explanation I should now give is that I instinctively preferred the world of Virgil to the world of Homer — because it was a more civilized world of dignity, reason and order.”

The most important of the central concepts of the *Aeneid* are *pietas* and *fatum*. Eliot understands fully the complex meaning of *pietas*, from its basic meanings (*pietas erga parentes, erga patriam, erga deos*) to its Virgilian connotations (op. cit. 126—128). The question is about *Lebensbegriff*, as a German would put it. “It is an attitude towards all these things, and therefore implies a unity and an order among them: it is in fact an attitude towards life.” The epic presentation of the Roman ideology required of Virgil the philosophical coordination of mythical ideas on fate into a unified conception in which *fatum* and Jupiter’s will are merged in the overall concept of *fata Iovis* (resp. *fata deum*). Eliot elaborates this brilliantly and probes into the teleological and moral implications.

“What is a Classic?” (1944)⁹ is a paper read in the Virgil society. We may assume that Eliot was duly inspired by an appreciative audience of Virgilians, which is reflected in the maturity of his ideas. According to Eliot (op. cit. 7 and 15—16) Virgil represents “central European values”, and is characterized by “a significant variety of discourse”. “But complexity for its own sake is not a proper goal: its purpose must be, first, the expression of finer shades of feeling and thought; second, the introduction of greater refinement and variety of music.”

Eliot’s conception of the term ‘classic’ is based on the conventional senses of the word. The Latin word *classicus* ‘pertaining to a class’; ‘first class’ has been borrowed by European languages primarily in three senses:

⁹ Published in London 1945, 3rd impr. 1946. Reprinted in *On Poetry and Poets*, London 1957, 53—71.

(1) of proved value; of the highest quality, (2) pertaining to ancient Greek and Roman culture, (3) simple, harmonious, not over-ornamented (as opposed to 'romantic'). Eliot keeps to the meanings given under (1). He cannot, however, be content with the mere receptive connotations of the word but requires of a true classic maturity in three respects: maturity in respect of (1) civilization, (2) language and literature, (3) mind and manners, i.e. behaviour. In practice this means that Europe has two classical authors of universal dimensions to offer: Virgil and Dante.

In the interpretation of the background of 'maturity' (op. cit. 10—15) Eliot does not mean that the civilization of Virgil's time, with Rome brutalized by civil war, represented maturity of an exceptional degree; what Eliot has in mind is an ideal civilization created by the poet. Here Eliot fails to notice an important factor which for example Petrarch had no difficulty in understanding, namely Cicero and his humanism. The poets of the Augustan age, such as Virgil and Horace (and, incidentally, Eliot does not understand the essence of the latter of the two), adopted the concept of *humanitas* of Cicero, made it their own and reaped a rich reward in their poetry. This is the historical mystery of maturity. Eliot should have included Cicero in his discussion of prose.

While Eliot does not attempt an analysis of the maturity of the language in front of his expert audience, he, however, treats them to genuine pearls of insight. Thus it is not true of Virgil that "this is a man of genius using the language" but "this man realizes the genius of language" or, as Eliot puts it (op. cit. 22) "The classic must, within its formal limitations, express the maximum possible of the whole range of feeling which represents the character of the people who speak that language (op. cit. 27)." It is easy to complete the picture created by Eliot on the basis of Virgilian scholarship. The Aeneid is a mature synthesis of the real and possible types of the classical epic. Virgil's hexameter rings superbly like a well-rehearsed orchestra. He makes brilliant use of, and brings to perfection, the work begun by his predecessors Ennius, Lucretius and Catullus. His nearest follower Ovid is too skilful to convince us, to say nothing of those who come even later. Virgil knows how to develop themes, rouse expectations, offer fulfilment, create lyrical pictures (*splendet tremulo sub lumine pontus* — 'the sea glimmers under the

shimmering light”),¹⁰ compress a movement in a few words (*ibant obscuri* — ‘they went as obscure figures’),¹¹ create an impressive climax (*At genus immortale manet* — ‘But the genus remains immortal’).¹²

The most impressive character in the Aeneid in human terms is Dido, Queen of Carthage, whose “past fate” briefly coincides with Aeneas’ “future fate”, to borrow the apt description of Hermann Broch.¹³ Circe, Calypso and Nausicaa are merely episodes in Odysseus’ journey, but when Aeneas and Dido meet, their entire fate, their higher ego, is in the balance: one must be destroyed. Dido falls in love not only with the very essence of the hero, but with his past fate, believing she has found a lifelong companion equally mistreated by fate, but the hero’s future fate destroys her world, and Dido decides to kill herself when the hero, obeying the will of the gods, continues his journey. On her death Dido is a queen proud of her achievements and a woman whose heart is broken and whose inner world has collapsed. This is precisely the heart of the tragedy, not the fact that a queen falls from on high.

By transferring the epilogue to Aeneas’ and Dido’s tragedy to Hades, the central point of the book of the underworld (Aen. 6, 450—476), Virgil at the same time transfers it to the depths of the human soul. Aeneas meets, or thinks he meets the ghostly spectre of Dido, speaks to it and admits that he has done wrong. He thirsts after a gesture of forgiveness, but Dido stands expressionless as a stone slab and a marble statue and vanishes into the shadows. Eliot interprets this scene as an example of the description of mature awareness and behaviour (op. cit. 20—21): “But I have always thought the meeting of Aeneas with the shade of Dido, in Book VI, not only one of the most poignant, but one of the most civilized passages in poetry. It is complex in meaning and economical in expression, for it not only tells us about the attitude of Dido — what is still more important is what he tells us about the attitude of Aeneas. Dido’s behaviour appears almost as a projection of Aeneas’ own conscience: this,

¹⁰ Aen. 7, 9.

¹¹ Ibid. 6, 268.

¹² Georg. 4, 208.

¹³ Hermann Broch, Kommentierte Werkausgabe. Hrsgb. v. P.M. Lützeler, 1976. Bd. 4: Der Tod des Vergil, 279—280.

we feel, is the way in which Aeneas' conscience would expect Dido to behave to him. The point, it seems to me, is not that Dido is unforgiving — though it is important that, instead of railing him, she merely snubs him — perhaps the most telling snub in all poetry: what matters most is, that Aeneas does not forgive himself — and this, significantly, in spite of the fact of which he is well aware, that all that he has done has been in compliance with destiny, or in consequence of the machinations of gods who are themselves, we feel, only instruments of a greater inscrutable power.”

T.S. Eliot's delicate Virgil critique is a convincing proof of the position of the poet of the *Aeneid* as a universal classic. He regards the Aeneidian world of values as being simultaneously Roman and European (*ibid.*): “It will be observed, finally, that the behaviour of Virgil's characters (I might except Turnus, the man without a destiny) never appears to be according to some purely local or tribal code of manners: it is, in its time, both Roman and European. Virgil certainly, on the plane of manners, is not provincial.”

I am convinced that T.S. Eliot's brilliant literary critique can make a fruitful contribution to classical philology. Classical scholarship needs the challenge of men of the calibre of Eliot or Nietzsche to avoid being caught in empirical-positivistic triviality. But T.S. Eliot should be an essential part of a general education in the humanities and he has a great deal to offer to university students. In my lecture course on the cultural tradition of antiquity I also deal with Eliot's Virgil critique and I usually say to my students: “If you can understand T.S. Eliot's ideas, it's very reassuring indeed, because I have nothing better to offer you in the field of cultural criticism.”